

PLANET

STORIES

WINTER
1946
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STRANGE ADVENTURES
ON OTHER WORLDS
—THE UNIVERSE OF
FUTURE CENTURIES

CARL
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The MAN THE SUN GODS MADE

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TWO THRILLING NOVELS OF FUTURE WORLDS

- THE MAN THE SUN-GODS MADE** By Gardner F. Fox 4
The Tryllans worshipped him as god. Yet grief bowed those superbly-muscled shoulders, for Tyr knew he was no more divine than the lowest ray-gunner of the invader hordes.
- THE SEVEN JEWELS OF CHAMAR** By Raymond F. Jones 90
Scattered, the jewels were maddening. Held in a grasping palm they bestowed power enough to rule the System. But space-roving Nathan and the deadly Firebird learned the terrible price of that power.

SEVEN FASCINATING SPACE-TALES

- LOVE AMONG THE ROBOTS** By Emmett McDowell 29
Henry Ohm found his robots hard to control—with that girl around. There was something about her—ah—personality!
- TEPONDICON** By Carl Jacobi 40
There was treasure beyond price in those plague-darkened cities of Ganymede, provided the seeker, too, had no price.
- SPACE BAT** By Carl Selwyn 48
Out of the caves of space it flew—huge, rapacious, terrifying. But Lou Flint wanted it more than he wanted the luscious Karen.
- FOG OF THE FORGOTTEN** By Basil Wells 63
Rebelling against science, his people had thrust themselves down into the ancient mists. Now Ho Dyak wanted light.
- EXAMPLE** By Tom Pace 73
Frantically, the space-liner called Commander Gray: "Disaster ahead—you can save us!" He smiled grimly; he knew the only way.
- SAVAGE GALAHAD** By Bryce Walton 77
Master of the slimy beasts of Venus, dedicated to survival—what buried instinct could drive him to suicide?
- BREATH OF BEELZEBUB** By Larry Sternig 83
Only half an ounce of the liquor from Planetoid Y-145 had been distilled. But that was enough to drive the universe mad!

P. S.'s DEPARTMENTS

- P.S.'s FEATURE FLASH** 75
- THE VIZIGRAPH** 120

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THE MAN THE SUN GODS MADE

By GARDNER F. FOX

They called him a god and worshipped him. He neither ate nor drank, nor breathed the wild free air, yet he was mighty beyond belief. But grief bowed those superbly-muscled shoulders, for he knew he was human.

TYR stood on the warm white sands and stretched. The hot yellow rays of the sun played across his ribbed chest and the muscles in his long legs and thick arms. Tyr smiled. It was good to be alive, even if he was a god.

He wondered when they would come to worship him again, sending the bittersweet keening of the *suota*-horns out across the silver deserts and blue lakes of Lyallar. He hoped it would be soon, for he had, despite himself, grown to like sitting on the



*He lunged
into the chamber
where Katha lay.
Her dark eyes
met his.*

ruby throne. From where he stood, looking across the groined vastness of the Lord Chamber, he could see the upturned faces of his people. Even the rat-face of Otho he liked at moments like those, for the wondrously beautiful face of Fay smiled red-lipped at him. Tyr gave many gifts to Fay from the treasures that the Lyallar heaped upon him. And always it seemed she was eager for more, her brown eyes flickering like those of a greedy child.

Tyr spread his arms, feeling millions of tiny nerve-ends in his skin open to drink in the energy pouring from the titanic orb of fire in the heavens that was sun to the planet Lyallar. Tyr ate no food, and breathed no air. All that he needed for his existence he got from the sun.

As the energy flooded into him, making him tingle in every fibre of his being, Tyr felt again the effect of that energy on his brain. It was as though the power he fed on was so great that it opened the deeper spaces of his mind so that any problem was no problem at all—while the moment lasted.

He had found the stone tower in a moment like that. Seen it at first miles away, standing lone and stark on the silver sand. Built of brownish rock, round as the bole of a tree, it was something new to him who had explored all the strange places of this planet. Tyr had run to it, testing his swift feet. He could have distanced a dozen cheetahs, one after another, could Tyr. He was more than swift. He was inhuman.

The lock was easy to break with all that energy flooding him. He merely took it in his big hands and his muscles writhed and bulged, and the flaky red metal of the lock snapped. With the flat of a hand he pushed open the door and went within. It was dim and cool inside, and at first Tyr did not like it.

There were queer objects all about him, some of glass, some of metal. Here were curves and cones and vibrating rods of the thickness of a man's little finger. And books! Even the libraries of the Trylla contained no books such as these. He lifted one down and browsed, and found that his mind was understanding it, knowing what those terms and symbols meant, without thinking. His mind frightened Tyr at times. It was almost not a part of him.

It was as though all the men and women who had been his forebears had left a little something of themselves in his make-up, so that their knowledge and experience could guide their descendant.

Many hours Tyr spent in that odd place. It was a change from the deserts and the ruby throne. Gradually, through the years, he found that he was amassing an education from the books and the glass and metal objects—

Suu-ohhh-taaaa!

THE CLARION NOTES rang sweet and clear. They brought Tyr erect, the peculiar ring chained to his neck bouncing on his chest. He looked toward the dim horizon, where stood Yawarta, city of the ruby throne.

This was the call to the god of the Lyallar. Tyr ran easily, like a perfect machine that never tired. Across the white sands, and through the eerie forest in which all the trees resembled frost-flakes, silver-white in the sun. Deep in the heart of the forest lay an azure pool, its blueness contrasting startlingly with the silver of the forest.

The towers of Yawarta were slim and dark beyond the grassy fields. Like drops of blood on a satin pillow they brooded, reminding the Tryllan race that they were slaves to the *ardth* who dwelt far beyond the nearest star.

A girl was standing before a golden door set flush with the hillside.

"Fay!"

"Speak not, on your life!" she whimpered.

They stood silent, breathing softly. Tyr heard the voices then, harsh voices, where the Tryllans spoke in musical syllables.

"The *ardth*! They have returned?"

"Yes. They swear to kill you, Tyr. They are hunting you now, along the tunnels to the door."

Tyr bent and swung the girl high on his chest, grinning. "They will never catch Tyr."

Tyr began to run. His legs blurred with the speed of his motion. He stepped out along the grassy slope, and down it, and then was running free on the plains. He heard Fay's gasp as she grew aware of his pace. She buried her head against his shoulder to breathe, and her yellow hair

whipped and stung his face as the wind tossed it.

For four hours Tyr ran, not needing to breathe. When he swung the girl down, he was as composed as though he had moved ten feet. Fay stared up at him with warm brown eyes.

"Truly you are a god, Tyr. Only a god could run without effort."

"No god. Only—only—"

He halted. He had no word to describe himself. Neither did the Trylla, except "god." So god he had become, unwillingly; yet he was dimly aware that he was unique among men, that he stood alone.

"We are far from the Old Ones, the *ardth*, here," he said. "It would be easy to dwell here on the deserts until they have left."

Fay stirred restlessly, saying, "I do not want to stay on the deserts. They are bare places. No people, no laughter."

"I don't blame you. There must be something I can do."

He rubbed his hands on the soft white fur that clasped his hips. A hot anger was beating up inside him, making his nostrils flare. The Old Ones! They had come back to Lyallar, where Tyr ruled! The masters of planets and the far reaches of space had come back. He was one, and the *ardth* were many. Individually, nothing could ever defeat him. But one against a race! He shook his head.

"You could fight them, Tyr. You are a god. What can the Old Ones do to you? There is no way of killing you. Sometimes an assassin has tried, while you sat on the ruby throne. But no one has ever succeeded."

That was true. Yet he did not tell her that his own uncanny speed saved him. There was no sense in testing fate, by letting a weapon strike him. He had a subtle knowledge that he might be immune to certain types of missiles, but he was not sure.

"You could walk into Yawarta and slay them all, Tyr," the girl said softly, watching him carefully with her brown eyes. "Then we could go back to the old days. You could give me that emerald necklace I want."

Tyr wondered at the greed in the brown eyes. It disturbed him. But it did not disturb him as much as the thoughts of the

Old Ones. Thought of them brought a yearning for battle that rose red and mist-like inside his great chest. How to tell of that hotness within him, where his guts ought to be, but were not, that made his heart pump with fury? Yet, despite his rage, he was alert and careful as a stalking cat. He could not tell this to Fay; she wanted him to walk unarmed into Yawarta and blast the *ardth* with some sort of supernatural power.

He walked around on the white sand, brooding at his moving feet. He looked into his mind for the words, stumbling and halting.

"Fay, the Trylla have made of me a god. Now I know I am no god. I am not such a god as the legends of the Tryllan cults tell of, at any rate. I am only a man. A human being, who is something of a freak."

There was a patient smile on the girl's red mouth. She shook her head and the soft yellow hair tumbled around her bare shoulders.

"We have spoken of this before, Tyr. Always you say that you are not a god, and then you turn around and do what only a god can do."

TYR SIGHED. "Maybe I am a god. Maybe I expect a god to be too much. But that is not exactly the point. It is this: the Trylla call me god, no matter what I call myself. Therefore I must act like a god, for their sake."

Fay nodded, brown eyes fastened on him.

Tyr said slowly, "A god would not let oppressors molest his people, would he, Fay?"

"That is just what I have said. You must go into Yawarta and slay and slay—"

"No. No, I do not think that is what a god would do."

Fay frowned slightly. She kicked at a lump of sand and watched it fly apart. She ran a finger into her thick yellow hair and twirled it.

"Of course you may be right," she said tartly. "I am not versed in the way of gods."

"Nor am I," scowled Tyr. "But, in the heart of me, something says there is another way. That, if I can convince the *ardth* that I could defeat them, smash

them in some way—then that would be the triumph of a god.”

“That might take a long time. I would like very much to have that emerald necklace. Otho said it was worn by Queen Yatha-sath two thousand years ago. Please, Tyr?”

She came close to him, perfumed warmth and soft white skin. Her mouth was very red. But Tyr looked away, frowning.

“The Old Ones derive their powers from a thing called science,” he said slowly. “It says so in a book in the Tower. If I could learn that science, I might defeat them with their own weapons. But that would take a long time. Many years.”

HE STARED up into the sun and smiled gently, feeling its hot rays lave his chest and arms and thighs. Like bubbles of air surging up through water, he felt the dormant strength of his muscles. He had strength. A strong man can fight with his hands and with his legs. He would fight.

He turned sharply to Fay and asked, “What is the Barrow that the Trylla often mention? Where is it?”

“The Barrow is the pride of the Trylla. Without it there would be no hope.”

“Yes, yes. I know. But what is it?”

“It is the hidden place where all the wartime secrets of the race are stored. When the last invasion of the Old Ones took place, nearly a hundred years ago, all the accumulated knowledge of the conquered Tryllans was locked away lest the Old Ones destroy it.”

“Could you find the Barrow?”

Fay shuddered. Tyr looked at her, saw her fingers move through her yellow hair, watched with gentle smile as white teeth nibbled at red lip. He put out his big hands and held her arms.

“It is for the Trylla that I ask.”

“I—I know. I can find the Barrow.” Her chin lifted defiantly. “Of what use are old legends if they make those who hear them weaklings and cowards? Better to—to die bravely than to hole up like the *tabbug* at the first cry of the hunting-cat!”

Tyr grinned at her, wondering if she believed in her own words. She was so lovely, so childishly greedy for pretty things, so—he frowned at the idea—so unconsciously selfish, wrapped in her own

interests, that abstract terms like bravery and cowardice seemed alien to her tongue. Her brown eyes flirted up at him from under their long lashes, and caught his warm grin.

She muttered sullenly, “The Barrow is five days’ journey from the Desert of the Dead, and that lies two days’ travelling from here.”

“So near?”

“Much of the journey is across terrible deserts, and the rest is over insurmountable mountain barriers. The Barrow is atop the tallest mountain on all the planet.”

“That makes it so much harder for the Old Ones to find it,” Tyr said.

“The Old Ones can fly. The Trylla must walk. Our monorails run only in the cities. Oh, Tyr, the only way you can win is to go into the chambers of Yawarta and destroy the leading *ardth*. You can do it no other way!”

“If Harl the Ancient still lives,” Tyr dreamed, “he could help me fight. He was the greatest of the Tryllan warriors. There are rumors he does live, in the Barrow. That is why I must find it. I need Harl.”

The girl nibbled at her red mouth sullenly, saying, “I don’t see why you don’t do as I say. In that way, you’d get to power faster. We wouldn’t have to share the glory with Harl.”

“The *ardth* aren’t bowling pins to fall at the sway of an arm, Fay. They are dangerous men. Wise men with enough savagery in their blood to make them vicious.”

Tyr knew he could never hope to walk into the secret chambers of the *ardth* alive. He knew his limitations. He was human, after a fashion. He bled when cut, and he ached when bruised. And the *ardth*—

The *ardth* were a strange race. They were nomads who swept across the trails of the stars in great vessels that spanned a bridge of space from planet to planet. Never happy for long, they were eaten by a cancerous unrest that drove them on and on, to the outermost rims of the galaxies, hunting always.

They had home planets, too, but they were seldom at home. Instead they chose to lock themselves in ships of metal and fling themselves out between the suns. Instead of green grass and trees, their windows looked on blackness relieved only by

twinkling dots that were stars, and steadily glowing pinpricks that were unexplored planets.

Five hundred years ago they had come to Lyallar. The Tryllans, then a great race, had fought them bitterly and had driven them off. Three hundred years later, they came again; this time they came for war. That war lasted seventy-two years and, at its end, the Tryllans were a broken race. And that time the Old Ones stayed, or, rather, their cities stayed—and the Glow.

NO ONE really knew what the Glow was. It made the Old Ones powerful, and was as closely guarded by them as was the Barrow by the Trylla. Without the Glow, the *ardth* were naught. They hid the Glow deep in their biggest city, that they named Mart.

"If we could go to Mart and find this Glow," said Tyr abruptly, out of his deep thought.

Fay laughed bitterly, "The Barrow one can find by rolling downhill, compared to finding the Glow and using it."

Tyr grunted. It was hard, being a god. Sometimes he wished he were like other men, for then he would have no people to protect, no Old Ones to battle for a race that looked to him for guidance. Often he had thought that the Old Ones might be gods, but he knew that none of them could do what he could do.

His godship prodded him into saying, "Let us find the Barrow, and Harl."

"Harl is old, very old," replied the girl. "He is so old that he must be a doddering gaffer now."

"But his brain would be young," Tyr argued. "And it is the brain that is trained in war from which I seek aid."

The girl sat on a rock and undid a sandal and shook sand from it. She shrugged petulantly and fastened her sandal. "Must we go now? It is almost night."

Tyr looked at the sun low on the horizon. Tyr did not like to travel by night. He preferred the hot day, when the sunrays beat with insistent heat about his tanned chest and shoulders. But there was need for hurry. The Old Ones did not stop for darkness, and neither would he.

"Come," he said shortly.

The way was easy, at first. In the red

light of the dying sun, they saw the sand before them, each rise and dip moulded into graceful curves by the winds that whipped the barrens night and day. They went lightly, swiftly.

Slowly the stars loomed in the darkening sky above them. And, as is the way with travellers the worlds over, they grew silent and more intimate in unspoken thought. Once or twice Fay's hand brushed Tyr's, and he helped her across the higher dunes.

On a hard swirl of sand, they stood close. Fay whispered, "All those stars, Tyr. You would think the Old Ones would be satisfied with so many. They might leave Lyallar alone!"

Tyr felt surprise at the emotion within him. It was almost a sympathy with the nomad oppressors.

"They have curiosity. I have it myself. I have lived on every desert that Lyallar can boast, yet I am ever searching for a bigger and a hotter one. Maybe the Old Ones are like that."

He looked down at the girl, smiling wistfully at the pale loveliness of her hair, at the warm brown of her eyes. He shivered, watching her. He wanted so much to take Fay and go out into the desert with her, away from everything that smacked of godhood. They could go to the Tower, and live there safely. The *ardth* would not find him there. There would be none to say him yea or nay. If—he was a god!

Tyr sighed and turned from Fay's red mouth and looked out across the unending dunes. An inner voice whispered, *The Trylla need you, Tyr. You are their god, and a god does not run away. When is a god needed more than in time of trouble? You cannot leave them, for they are as children. You must fight.* He nodded in the darkness, grimly.

Side by side they went on through the night. And now they went apart from each other, as though the decision were a final parting. Words were unnecessary. The Trylla needed Tyr.

It was dawn when they saw the others trudging wearily across a far bank of sand. Tyr shouted and waved, summoning them. Dragging deadened limbs they came, in torn clothes and with smears and streaks of dirt on gaunt faces. They stood before him, and in their eyes was the dull glaze

of despair and in their voices the sullen acceptance of their fate.

"We fled after seeing the *ardth* ships come."

"They will find us, though. We want just a few more days of freedom."

"All of Yawarta is captive to them. They have made Otho governor, and thrown Zarman, whom you appointed ruler, into the cells."

"And they have sent out commands that you be returned to them at once. They have offered rewards."

Tyr grinned mirthlessly, shaking his tawny head. A return meant torture, possibly death. If the Old Ones thought enough of him, they might feed him to the Glow.

He said, "Fay and I are bound for the Barrow. We will find Harl and call him to lead new armies against the *ardth*. Join with us. We shall win."

"We cannot win . . . alone."

They looked at him out of dull eyes in which tiny flames of hope sprang alive and flickered, and then died. They shuffled their feet. They looked tired enough to fall, and the bare soles of several bled red drops into the sands.

"Sleep," said Tyr gently. "You need rest. Dawn is coming up, and I can go on in the sunlight to survey the path before us."

He drew Fay with him, over the crest of a dune. His fingers rose to touch the circlet of dull gold that gleamed from the chain about his neck. Slowly he unfastened it as Fay watched, staring. The ring was a part of him, for he had worn it ever since he could remember. Now he wanted Fay to wear it. It bruised his ribs when he ran, or bounced on his back and against his jaw. But more than that, every Tryllan knew that ring. It would be a symbol of power in Fay's hands.

"Use it well," he said, closing her white fingers about it.

Her brown eyes were wide, looking up at him. Tyr put out his hands and caught her arms above her elbows. He held her like that, just looking at her beauty, for a long moment.

And then he turned and ran swiftly, lest the muffled thunder of his blood should smash the resolutions his brain had welded so firmly.

II

SAND slipped away in back of him, as wind passes the arrow in its flight. Air was cool on his chest and on the powerful thighs that rippled with muscles as he ran. The sun beat at him, leaving him in its warmth. He grew strong and powerful as the cells of his skin sucked in energy.

Run, Tyr. Run faster and yet faster, that the thoughts teeming in your brain may be left behind. You are a god, and a girl named Fay is not for you. You have only the *ardth*-inen, Tyr. They are your enemies, and they must be vanquished!

But how? But how? His brain howled in desperation. They are so many. They know sciences, and they have weapons. You have two bare hands and a strong body, a strange body, a body that frightens you at times, it is so different.

Something dug into the sand ahead of him and exploded. Tyr swerved like a frightened faun and came to a stop. Something else blew up a little closer to him. Hard granules of sand stung his flesh.

He saw them, then, in the sky. Three sleek aircraft with stubby wings and a long fuselage out of which shot tiny glints of red.

The *ardth*!

Tyr drew his hands down his ribs, lips twisted. By the god that he was supposed to be! He'd show them a race, even if they could fly and he could only run.

The sun was hot and searing. Good! It was his ally, that immense orb. While it shone, they could not catch him.

Tyr ran.

His pace was a blurred thing. His flight was that of the *kala*-bird whistling before the hawk. He swerved and he darted, and he made fools of the men in the shiny things above and behind him. It was an incredible thing that he did, but Tyr was an incredible being. The rules were not made for him, for who made the rules knew nothing of Tyr. He outran those aircraft.

All day long, while the sun beat upon him, Tyr flew. Vaguely he realized that he was a living, functioning thing of energy—not pure energy, but energy translated into human power.

Yet he was human, and the fliers were

machines. He lost them among the rocks, but the aircraft spread in widening circles and one of them found him again. And so Tyr ran on. Once or twice he stumbled, toward the end of the day. The thunder of the jet planes was loud in his ears. They swooped low, casting long shadows before them.

There were no more explosions. Those had stopped once he began his mad race. He thought, 'At least, Fay and the others are safe. I've led the *ardth* a long way from them.' The muscles in his legs were hardening, knotting. They grew heavy and inert.

Tyr staggered.

The planes had landed, and the men were coming for him. The stars-and-bars on their jackets loomed bigger and bigger as he stood and waited. His chest rippled with sweat, and his long arms hung limp on either side of his giant frame.

He could fight and die here, with the moon starting its rise in front of him, and the wilderness of his run behind him. His body was pouring the energy through his system again, and his muscles grew less heavy.

"By Kagan!" swore the first *ardth*-man, staring at him with round eyes over the muzzle of a lifted gun. "Who are you, man? What are you?"

"He's their god," rasped another, praising Tyr with knowing eyes.

"No wonder," grunted the third, holstering his weapon. "A god such as he would find me among his worshippers! They'll never believe us on Rigel-7!"

"Do you yield?" asked the first.

They did not seem so frightening, close up. They were like Tyr. They were men, smaller than he, but men. He could kill them all, here and now, but—

He owned a desire to see more of these *ardth*. Perhaps he could reason with their commander, make some sort of compromise. He would do anything to save the Trylla. Fay and the others were safe. Let them go to the Barrow. He would know where to find them when he escaped from the *ardth*. And he would escape. There was no prison made that could hold Tyr.

He said slowly, "I yield. I will go with you."

Dully, despite all his hopes and plans,

he knew himself a complete and total failure as a god.

HER HAIR was black as the tip of a raven's wing, parted in the middle, and drawn back over tiny ears. She had black eyes and a wide, crimson mouth that kept smiling at him, gently. She stood in the midst of the cloaked *ardth*-men who stared at him as they listened to the voices of the airmen who had captured him.

Tyr grew uncomfortable under her steady gaze. He shifted his feet, feeling silly, looming so big above the smaller pilots. He felt that they all were laughing at him. What a god he was! No wonder they laughed at him secretly. A god who was the protector of his race, allowing capture by three pilots he could have killed with three blows of his big hands.

The eyes and the mockery of the men he did not mind, but the steady eyes of the woman—

Forget her, and look about you, Tyr. This is a room of the Old Ones, with its silver and black-glass windows arching a hundred feet up along the wall, and the hooded eagle design carved into the stone and wood. A high-backed chair stood empty on a rostrum as the man who usually filled it stood with the others, watching him. This was wealth, from the priceless red damask drapes at the windows to the hand-laid tiles beneath his feet.

It was no use. Her dark eyes were too steady.

"A lie," said one of the Old Ones calmly. "No man could do what he did."

"He is no man, sire. He is the one the Trylla worship. He is—Tyr!"

They started at that. The pilot had told his story cleverly. He grinned with self-appreciation as the murmurs and the cries rewarded him. Tyr knew the closer scrutiny of the eyes beneath drawn brows. They ate him up, those eyes. Especially the eyes of the woman.

A lean man with a bald head and iron-grey mustache stepped forward and walked around Tyr, his glittering eyes probing. Shaking his head dubiously, he said, "Katha, you're our biochemical expert. Can it be?"

The woman with the black hair came toward him, swaying gracefully.

"I must make tests, Space Commander,"

she said, and Tyr liked the hoarse vibrancy of her voice. It sent tingles down his spine. But maybe that was the black eyes of her that smiled up at him as she asked, "Is it true, what he says?"

"Yes, it's true. I outran their planes. I could have killed them, but I did not choose to."

"Then why didn't you?" she smiled.

"Because I — show me to your commander. I want to treat with him. That is why I suffered capture. I will offer peace for peace. All I ask—"

The lean man with the bald head came around in front of Tyr and stared at him with cold eyes.

"I am Space Commander Ronald Mason," he said flatly. "I am in charge of Expeditionary Space Force to the Fornax Cluster. You will offer peace? But there is no war."

Tyr held the snarl in his throat as he replied, "But there will be war, unless the *ardth* are willing to deal with me for the liberty of the Trylla."

Mason smiled, but Tyr saw the flecks of passion deep in his ice-blue eyes. "The Trylla are a free race."

Tyr said patiently, "The Trylla worship me. They think I am a god. I know, and you know, that I am nothing of the sort. Yet I would help them, if I could. You cannot keep me here, if I seek to escape. I can plunge this planet into the bloodiest war you ever saw. But I do not want to do that. I seek only peace. Peace, and some sort of pride for the Trylla, that they may once again hold up their heads—"

Mason interposed, "A laudable desire. But the Trylla are quite content. Otho tells me they will make no trouble. As for your idle boast of escaping—"

Space Commander Mason gestured and turned away with, "Test him, Katha. See why his responses vary so far from the norm."

Red anger beat up in Tyr in mounting pulsings. He bit into his lip and eased up to the tips of his toes. His muscles writhed. He—

A cool hand touched his forearm. The black eyes were there again, and the red mouth was smiling at him.

"The tests? Please?"

Tyr licked his lips, confused. He looked at the *ardth*, and down at the girl, whose

eyes were sapping the mad rage in his heart. He said, "Yes, the tests."

"Follow me."

THE ROOM was big and white, and fantastically clean. Chrome and plastic gleamed and shone under the bluish-white ceiling that diffused soft brightness into every corner. A fluoroscope machine stood against the north wall. On tables were set scalpels and needles and rolls of cotton. Electronic ray-machines, microscopes and cyclotroncancerous peered beyond them. This was the biochemical science of the Old Ones inside four walls.

Katha closed the door behind her and loosed her black cloak. She was garbed in black blouse with a star-and-bar in silver threaded into the material. Tight trousers, white, gave her a streamlined look.

"Be comfortable, please. This will not hurt, what I am about to do."

Tyr watched her roll a big machine out, saw her thrust a needle with a handle into a jar of white liquid. She saw him watching her, and laughed softly.

"You are like a caged animal. You do not like walls, do you?"

"No. I prefer the desert."

"You have spent all your life on the desert?"

"All. Ever since I was small."

She turned from a wad of cotton that she was unrolling to regard him thoughtfully from under long black lashes.

"A boy. What of your parents?"

"I don't remember them, if there were any to remember. The first thing I recall is sand under my feet, and running. The sun was always my friend. I love the sun. It feeds me. I need nothing to exist, other than the sun."

Her left hand was warm where it caught his wrist. The damp cotton was swept across his flesh swiftly.

"I remember a lot of things about my youth. Unconnected things, like the first day I found the blue lake and the silver forest. The day I killed a *panth* with my bare hands. The first night I saw the stars, and recognized them for what they were."

Katha held his hand in hers and said, "I am going to draw blood. It will hurt—a little." As the ruby liquid oozed from his wrist, the woman went on speaking.

"And you cannot recall anything beyond that? Only that you were a boy, and that you grew up?"

"Only that. It was many years before I saw another . . . human. The Trylla are not desert-dwellers. They like their cities. But I saw a caravan, and came close to examine it, and when the guards saw me, I ran so swiftly they started rumors."

Her mouth smiled in amusement as she walked across the room.

"No wonder. A man who can outrun three aircraft is quite a runner."

"From that began the tales about me. A hunter would shoot and miss. That started my invincibility legend. After many years, during which I found the Tower, they sent a delegation to me, to ask me to be their god, to take the ruby throne."

"How did you learn to speak, if you never knew other men and women?"

Tyr paused. Some of his education he had gotten from the books in the Tower. His other knowledge, and it was vast, he secured from eavesdropping in the narrow alleys of Yawarta.

But he said, "Oh, I just picked it up."

"The tower you mention. What is that?"

"An old building I broke into. It stands by itself on the Desert of the Whipping Wind."

"Can you read?"

"No," he lied.

She was sliding a splinter of glass under a frosted screen, and depressing a button, and bending. Tyr watched, wondering what she sought.

"That is too bad," she murmured. "For if you—you—you—ohh!"

Her face whitened as she stared at him.

"What is it?"

"Your blood . . . if it is blood. It is so—so different!"

KATHA put out a white hand and deflected a switch on the wall. A section of panelling slid back, disclosing a screen on which stood the three-dimensional images of the black-cloaked men in the throne room.

"Space Commander, I must see you. Already the preliminary test has disclosed revolutionary reactions."

Her voice was excited. It made the bald, lean man jump a little. Tyr saw him stride toward him, loom larger and larger, walk

out of the screen and—disappear. A moment later, the laboratory door opened and Mason entered.

"What is it, Katha?" he said coolly.

"His blood. It is not blood that we know, that carries food and oxygen, and the toxics. It is alien. The cell structure is apparently designed to transmit—this is going to sound silly, and I haven't the opportunity of checking my first impressions, to make sure—but the cells appear constructed to transmit pure energy in the form of sheer heat."

"But the tissues, girl! In a normal man the food becomes energy in the tissues. How—?"

"I don't know. Look for yourself."

She stood away from the microscope, gesturing toward it. Space Commander Mason bent to the screen. His right hand raised the electronic power an hundred units. He stood like that for many minutes, frowning, scarcely breathing. When he straightened, he looked at Tyr for a long time, breathing harshly.

He said, "It seems to be a blood that carries nothing but radiating heat pulses. That means he intakes his energy pure. The efficiency rate is perfect. Katha, he isn't a man. Not a man such as we know men."

Katha took Tyr by the arm and led him behind a fluoroscope machine, saying, "Stand here, please." Mason was eyeing him steadily as he walked in front of the screen.

Tyr grinned to himself. They were in for a shock, if this machine did what he thought it did.

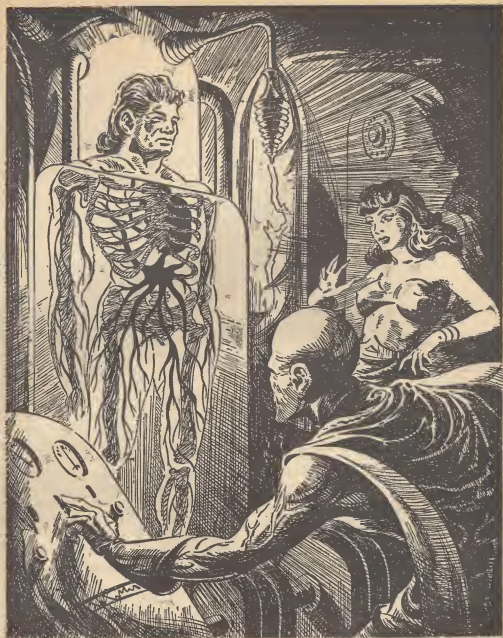
The room darkened. A pale green glow came and pulsed. The plate before him seemed to hum softly. The dark blobs of shadow that were the Commander and Katha moved suddenly and grew still. Deadly still.

"The machine is wrong!" croaked Commander Mason.

"It was tested yesterday, Commander. Besides, he has a heart, and a blood stream."

"No stomach! No lungs! No intestines!" he breathed.

"And in place of them, strange organs that we know nothing of. Commander, let me take him to the home planet for study! What an experience. A mutant that—"



"The machine is wrong!" croaked Commander Mason.

Light grew from the ceiling, slowly. Mason stood beside the switch, staring at Tyr. His eyes were wild, having seen a miracle. He shuddered and drew his cloak tighter about him.

"A mutant! And *what* a mutant!"

Katha said reflectively, "He has organs in place of digestive tracts that are designed for some purpose. But what purpose?"

Tyr slid away from the fluoroscope ma-

chine. He flexed his muscles. Long enough now had he rested and played their games with them. Now he was going into action.

"Commander, about my offer—"

"Quiet, man. Quiet! I need to think. A long time ago I knew a man who said—but no! What I am thinking is incredible. It could not be. And yet—and yet—"

Tyr picked up a bar of steel and balanced it lightly in his palms. Slowly his fingers closed around it. Muscles lifted on

arms and back. The bar bent into a circle.

"My muscles may be different, too," he said. "About my offer. Is it peace or war? All I want—"

Space Commander Mason moved his right hand swiftly downwards. It came up from beneath his cloak with a gun. He smiled grimly, "You're big and you're powerful as a bullock, and you're *different*. I don't want to test your skin with a shower of light photons, but—"

Katha came up to Tyr. There was a hungry look in her eyes and about her mouth. She whispered, "Be sensible, god of the Trylla! You are a long time dead. Come with me. Later you can meet the Space Commander, when his surprise has worn off."

Across the black sheen of her coiled hair he looked at the bald man and read a pride as great as his own in the blue eyes. Dimly he knew that Commander Mason was possessed of a will of steel and power as great as his own, among his people. Tyr nodded.

"I will come with you."

Katha lifted her black cloak and threw it around her slender shoulders. She cast a red-lipped smile at him and tucked her arm through his.

"Come along to my apartment," she laughed. "I want you to tell me more about yourself."

THE ALLEYS were dark and deserted. Underfoot the rounded edges of the *calanian* cobblestones bit into their thin sandals. The cyclopean stone structures towered black and forbidding against the pale greyness of the night sky. Like spiderwebs of giant structure, great space-vox antennae were flung from tower to tower.

They walked slowly through the warm night, and others walked faster. It was Tyr who heard the clanking of a guard's accoutrements, the *thup* of a holstered ray-gun smiting a trousered thigh, the harsh rattle-clang of manacles and chains.

His wrist dragged her against him, and back with him into the shadows of a recessed door. Many men were coming down the street. There were a lot of chains, too.

A sliver of moonlight touched the leading man who walked stooped with iron and the pain of open whipcuts.

"Zarman!" breathed Tyr.

His brain raced. Zarman was the governor appointed by Tyr. The *ardth* had taken him and flogged him. It was a sign of their power over Tyr. The people needed a sign from their god. If he were to free Zarman and send him back to the people—

Tyr was across the cobblestones and his right fist was coming up in a short arc. A startled guard did not have time to open his mouth before the back of his head touched his spine and his neck cracked under that blow. Tyr lowered him with his left hand in the small of his back, as he snatched up the heatgun from the holster.

"Tyr!" sobbed Zarman, straightening.

The others knew him too, and in place of the blind pain and despair, came the laugh of hope to snap their backs straight and their chins forward.

"Beware," they whispered. "There are more of them."

Tyr moved into the shadows, saying, "Keep marching. Turn at the corner—and wait."

The guards came on unsuspecting, but this time there were three of them, talking and jesting. Tyr came out of the shadows with naked hands and he hit so fast that one guard writhed on the stone street before the others had their guns out. Another dropped with splintered ribs. The third opened his mouth to scream. Two big hands took his throat and viced on it.

Tyr dropped the guard and nodded to the prisoners, "Keep moving. Zarman waits for me around the corner."

There were only two more guards. Tyr charged low. His fists pumped.

Tyr shook himself, standing alone in the alley, with the moon above beaming down at him, bathing him in silver. The street was deserted except for a white face above a dark cloak, and Tyr. The girl had a gun in her hand.

"Shoot," Tyr said, tensing himself.

"Goose," whispered the girl, and bent her head to watch her hand holster her weapon.

"Why do you not shoot?"

"Oh, I don't know. I always was a sucker for an underdog."

But there was another explanation in her dark eyes looking up at him that made Tyr blink. He caught her elbow and walked with her around the corner.

Zarman and the others were ranged along the wall in darkness. Zarman came forward and looked at the girl, and whispered, "She is an *ardth*."

"Forget her. Tell me of yourself."

"The Old Ones caught us easily. Otho blabbed with his traitorous mouth. They came and took us, though we fought."

"If I set you free, what can you do for your freedom?"

"We can fight, god Tyr. We can burrow like the mole, and battle like a cornered rat. Try us!"

Katha went around the corner for the key to the manacles. She searched the implementa of the guards and brought it back proudly.

The men lowered the chains and manacles into a hole they dug beneath the cobblestones. They reset the stones and kicked the dirt into crevices between them. One of them took the gun Tyr handed him.

Zarman made a motion to the men, and they faded out of sight.

"We go underground. Into the old tunnels dug during the war with the *ardth*. Only the Trylla know those labyrinths."

"Good. I shall get word to you."

Katha sighed when Zarman was out of sight.

Tyr asked dryly as they walked, "Why did you not shoot me? You had your gun out."

"That was for the guards—in case your fists were not enough."

"But you are an *ardth*!"

The girl sighed and said, "It is such a nice moon. And we are almost at my rooms."

She laughed softly, and Tyr wondered why.

III

TYR HAD NEVER SEEN such sybaritic luxury as was revealed when he let the goldthread drapes rustle across the arched doorway behind him. Strewn cushions, plump and fat, with red-and-white worked in thin curves across their surfaces; the blue tinted walls that radiated warmth; the richly toned murals and the hidden lights bespoke limitless wealth. Low bookcases crammed the walls. Perfume pervaded the cool air. It was a feminine scent, cloying, lingering.

Katha lifted a scarlet jug and poured cool white liquid into two crystal hemispheres. One she handed to Tyr, the other she raised in her white, red-nailed hand.

"To freedom," she laughed softly, and drank.

The white wine was rich and heady, and it warmed his throat going down. Tyr sipped again, and again. He looked around the room with unveiled eyes.

This was just one apartment of one girl. She ranked high in the councils of the *ardth*, but this was a planet far from home. And all the luxury before him! Why, one of those pillows with the red-and-white curves would make Fay's eyes bulge in jealousy. And he was pitting himself against a race that could give a woman this, for herself!

He grimaced. What could one man—even such as Tyr—do against such a race? He should quit now and enjoy himself with this woman who looked at him with those steady black eyes. He told himself all that, hating the truth of it.

A cool hand snuggled into his palm. "Tell me about you," Katha smiled.

"There isn't anything to tell."

"You have strength and incredible speed. But what are your other powers, Tyr? You are a mutant, a changeling. You know that. But why, Tyr? Why? Nature doesn't try changes unless she is fitting a being for something."

Katha was very close to him. She was perfumed and she was womanly, and Tyr was used to neither. She was as subtle and complex as some rare drug, where Fay was as transparent, in her childish hungers, as plate glass.

It may have been the white wine, he thought afterward, but all he saw now was her red mouth and the mocking amusement swimming in her black eyes. He kissed her, holding her close in his arms.

"We're straying from the subject," she smiled up at him from his arms.

It was then that the cough sounded, from the golden drapes of the door. Otho stood smirking in the opening, eyes leering. From head to toe he glistened in a rainbowed silk that bellied and sank about his form with a sensitiveness to air currents that made it seem alive.

He had a gun in his hand and it was levelled at Tyr.

"I am sorry to interrupt your—amusements—"

Tyr did not think he moved fast, but he was in front of Otho even as the eyes of the other were commencing to widen in fright. Tyr hit the gun upward, slamming it against Otho's sneering mouth where it made a wide gash. The gun fell to the rug, and Tyr put out his hands and took hold of the sleazy silk and lifted. Otho dangled a foot off the floor.

"I could break your spine," Tyr whispered.

Otho was white. He dared not speak.

"I could put the fingers of one hand around your fat neck and snap it."

Otho closed his eyes and shuddered.

Tyr dropped him and Otho fell loosely to the floor and rolled over and came to his hands and knees. The big brown god of the Trylla loomed vast and massive above his crouching form.

"You do not show respect to your god, Otho," Tyr grinned dangerously. "Nor to a woman. At least, you might be courteous, if you are not religious."

Tyr listened to the mumble that came from the man's mouth, watched him crawl away. He turned to Katha, "That is the governor Mason gave the Trylla."

Katha let her hip rest against the onyx tabletop as her white fingers sought for an hydroette. The end came greenly alive at her first intake of breath. Blowing green smoke from between her red lips she leaned back and laughed softly.

"You know, you *are* a god, in some ways. Your very bigness, the titanic strength and speed of you. If you swore allegiance to the *ardth*, you would rise fast. You would be a space commander in a few years."

"Is that a promotion over being a god?"

"Tyr, listen to me. Be sensible. Use that brain of yours. You have a brain, and a good one. It is untutored, but it sops up knowledge as a Venusian sponge does water! I saw your eyes moving in that laboratory of mine. You deduced the uses of the fluoroscope, the electronic microscope. You needed only to see them in action—"

She caught her breath. The skin around her lips showed white, as her mouth tightened. "Perhaps you could even dupli-

cate them, given time and the materials, just from seeing them. Could you, Tyr?"

Tyr wondered, himself. His mind held a confused jumble of plates and wires, and remembrances of diagrams he had seen in books in the Tower. Left alone, he rather imagined he could do what Katha hinted. Especially if he worked in sunlight. For the sun would open the facets of his mind, make his brain as keen and alive as his body, give it that subconscious awareness of knowledge that awed him.

"It may be racial memories," he said slowly. "In most men those are buried too deeply for practical use. But with me it may be different. I do know that things do not long remain a mystery with me, once I ponder on them."

Katha walked across the room, staring at the cushions that she kicked idly aside. Her thin brows were puckered.

"I said you could be a Space Commander, Tyr. You could be more than that. You could be *Presider* itself, if—if what I think about you is true.

"The Trylla think the *ardth* a heartless crew. Oh, I know. But what the Trylla, and the other inhabitants of the planets we have taken over do not know is this: We *ardth* are facing a fight against extinction. It won't come for centuries, but it is coming, as surely as you live.

"*The Glows are dying!*"

"And when that happens, all our cities and all our spaceships—you might say our lives as well—will come to a stop. If you—"

MEN CAME through the doorway, and Space Commander Mason was in front of them. Otho poked his fat and sneering face between two *ardth* and laughed at Tyr. The men splayed out and Mason walked toward them, a grim smile on his lips.

"You've left quite a trail behind you tonight, Tyr," he said. "Those guards, then Otho. I tried to treat with you as an equal. Your word means much with the Trylla. But I made a mistake."

Katha ran before the Commander and said swiftly, "Katha reporting on mutant Tyr of the planet Lyallar. From observations, my conclusions are that he is an advanced form of life, requiring no food but taking his energy directly from another

source. That his strength is phenomenal. That his brain is superhuman. That he must be tested further. My recommendation is—"

Mason put her aside and gestured to his men.

"—that he be shipped to the home planet for study."

Tyr shook his head and said, "No," but he never took his eyes away from the man with the bald head.

Mason lifted his hand suddenly.

And Tyr moved.

He went fast, so fast that his arms were mere blurs lifting Mason off his feet and flinging him. He swung up over a table and drove both heels into a man's chest. He hit another *splat* on the jaw just as the man's finger tightened on the trigger and a bolt of fire went toward the high ceiling. Now their guns were aiming and shooting yellow bolts at him. He caught three of them on his chest.

Those yellow fires burned momentarily, before his pores could suck their ravaging power into his system. But they filled him with a wild, savage elation. His throat keened as he charged the men by the entrance, who knelt and fired as their eyes widened, seeing him come, growing bigger and bigger before them.

He did not stop. He ran over the men, and left them broken on the floor.

Tyr chuckled grimly, his feet treading a rug. His big right fist held a solargun that he had wrenched from a falling soldier. A weapon for the Trylla! His shoulder splintered a door with two hundred pounds of energy behind it. The lock went through the wood and Tyr was onto the cobblestones.

The street was dark and empty. He ran with the wind, dodging around corners and leaping along straight streets. Far behind him there came shouts and the dull thump-ping of pounding feet.

The cyclopean walls of Yawarta rose before him. Here and there hung the great nets of the fishermen, hung out to dry on stout wooden pegs. Up then he went, his arms lifting his massive body with ease. From bastion to ledge he went up the wall like a scurrying spider.

Now he stood on the broad top, beneath the stars. He raised an arm and waved it at the city, and went over the other side.

He ran free, away from Yawarta.

Behind him he could hear the *phffft-phffft* of the jet planes rising to pursue him, leaping upwards like hounds from the racing barriers. Tyr grinned and stretched his long legs out so that the ground sped by eerily. They could not catch him under the stars, not with this weapon in his hand.

Wind whistled past his ears. He headed for the silver forests he could see in the dim distance. He would be under their shelter soon.

Beams of light showered the ground, hunting him. They slid all around, missing him as he dodged gracefully, swerving from their pale radiance.

Soon he would be beneath those trees. Nothing on all Lyallar could catch him then.

Tyr swung the solar gun upward, put the cold muzzle to his naked chest, and pulled the trigger.

SUNLIGHT tinted the bluffs a pale *S*amber, spreading a gossamer gold across the shelving stone ledges. It made dark shadows undulate in rock crevices, and sent tiny cascades of brilliant red and yellow from veins of quartz. The cliffs towered high above a rolling countryside where hummocks of grass grew in clustered greenness.

Tyr stood erect on the jagged tongue of rock, staring down at a file of men and women walking across the hills. He was naked but for the white cloth at his middle into which the butt of the solar gun protruded at a rakish angle. Towering huge in the morning sun, he looked the god, by every inch of him, that the Trylla thought him to be.

He grinned and patted the walnut handle of the weapon. That blast of power had given him needed energy last night, when the sun was on the other side of the planet. His follicles had drunk it in, and his strange organs filtered it throughout his body.

All night long had he run, yet he was fresh and strong.

Now he looked across the brown valley, and saw the Trylla walking across it, beginning the long ascent up the other side. Here and there he recognized familiar figures. Fay was at the head of the column,

rust ahead of young Texel and grim old Gaarn. Tyr scanned the blue sky. No *ardth*-men there!

He lowered himself over the jagged edge of the bluff. His canny feet, feeling about like sensitive fingers, found chinks in the weather-worn rock. He went down foot by foot, yet swiftly.

When he dropped the last twenty feet to the crumbly valley bottom, the Trylla were only a few miles from him. His straight descent had saved him hours of travel. He could catch them now in a matter of minutes.

Fay saw him first, turning her golden head almost as if some telepathic thought commanded her. She cried out, and the slender column wavered and halted.

Tyr came up to her with outstretched hands and a smile on his lips, but the smile faded when he saw her eyes.

"Why have you returned?" she asked numbly. "You made your bargains with the *ardth*, for the girl named Katha. What else did they give you for Lyallar, besides the girl?"

"For Lyallar? Besides the girl? Are you mad, Fay? And you others—do you believe what she says? Fay, what—"

Gaarn said sourly, "Deny it, then. Deny that you went alone with this woman Katha to plot our undoing. Deny that Zarman and others who trusted you were flogged."

"I plotted no one's undoing. And as for Zarman—"

"He was flogged, wasn't he?" howled Texel, his eyes two abysses of anguish.

"Flogged before I—"

Texel spat at him, and Tyr quivered and his hands came up. Sadly, he let them fall again. Force would accomplish nothing. And a god must be understanding.

"I freed Zarman and the others as they were being taken through the streets," he said patiently. "As for Katha, she is a biologist of the *ardth*."

"You were alone with her," Fay muttered sullenly. "Otho saw you kissing her."

"Otho! So that is where you get your news."

"The talking trees, the silver ones," said Gaarn between toothless lips. "They pick up subsonic messages. That was how we heard."

"And of course, you believe. It matters

not that the *ardth* appointed Otho in place of Zarman. Take his word to mine. It was Otho that sent the messages out, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said a woman.

"Otho wants me as a captive. So do the *ardth*. Otho hopes that you will turn me in. There will be a reward for me. That is why he sent out that message. He wants to turn the Trylla against me."

He talked to their eyes that reflected their feelings, fighting to recapture their trust, "If the *ardth* kill me, what hope is left to you? You all say I am a god, your god. Yet you desert me at the first lies of a renegade!"

The men shuffled their feet. Their faces were haggard, and lined with bitterness and distrust. In some eyes, Tyr could read real hate.

"Why have you come back?" whispered Fay, staring up at a distant mountaintop. "To turn us in? To give my back to the floggers? Am I that valuable to the *ardth*?"

Tyr pleaded, "Should I have returned alone, if my purpose was your capture? If that were the case, the skies would be alive with aircraft! I knew you were on your way to the Barrow. I could have made you all prisoners by now, if such was my intent. Reason it out. Otho tells you lies to turn you away from the one thing that had any chance of helping you!"

LIKE CHILDREN, their faces grew hopeful, as their minds absorbed his words. Fay was biting her lip. From under her yellow lashes, her brown eyes studied him.

"But you kissed this Katha, didn't you? You kissed an *ardth*-woman! The god of the Trylla would never do that."

Tyr could see her illogical reasoning was swaying the others. They were hesitant, reproachful.

He said defiantly, "I kissed her, because she was a woman, and lovely. I—"

Fay turned her back. The others looked from the girl to Tyr and back at the girl again.

"I am no traitor, because of that kiss. I—"

They were not listening, but following Fay who was walking swiftly away, and toward the hills in the purple distance. His fingers closed on empty bitterness as

he stood there alone, miserable. His people . . . following a girl toward destruction.

Sorrow gnawed in his heart. This was the fate of a god, then, that his children should misunderstand him, perhaps even that they should hate him. Still, he did not blame them. They were so alone, so helpless, and so afraid.

Watching them move away, Tyr knew they needed him more than ever. They were leaving the only one who stood any chance of helping them. Without him, the Trylla were like toys before the hard, sure hands of the *ardth*.

He touched the handle of the solar gun and let his fingers trail away.

He would have to find the Barrow alone, now.

TWO DAYS LATER, Tyr parted the green fronds of a mountain bush and looked at the gleaming whiteness of the Barrow. It was a low rounded dome, lying across the hard whitish rocks of a strange mountain peak. From where he stood, he could make out arches receding back in under the dome, many of them. The arches were so many that each looked like a reflection of the others.

The Barrow, he thought with dull triumph. It was camouflaged perfectly. That roundness gave no glint to a watcher in the sky. Its lowness cast no shadow. Its whiteness blended with the dazzling brilliance of the white mountain rocks. No wonder it had stood years without detection. Even looking for it as he was, Tyr almost missed it. Only the arches, seen at a certain angle, betrayed its existence.

He loped toward it, breaking into the open. Only when he was near the arches did he see the woman on the ground to one side, kneeling. Before her a man lay on his back.

Tyr went forward on the tips of his toes, as silent as a breeze moving across rock.

The girl knelt beside the man, was moving her hands over him swiftly, competently. Then she leaned back on her haunches and shook her dark head. The black blouse and white slacks looked familiar. When he saw her face as she raised it, he knew.

"Katha," he said.

The girl whirled, reaching for a gun at her hip. But when she saw him fully she gave a low cry and scrambled to her feet. "Tyr, Tyr! Oh, I'm so glad I've found you!" And was running to him.

He tried to be curt, but it was useless. There was too much joy shining out of those black eyes, too much laughter and delight. And she was so feminine! He put out his hands and held her arms, making her stay a little away from him. Tyr wondered if she heard the wild pounding of his heart.

"Why?" he asked. "Why are you here? Why did you come searching for me?"

Laughter was like musical hoarseness in her throat. With head flung back so that she could hold him with her eyes, she said, "Because Space Commander Mason ordered that you be shot on sight. Because you are a doomed man. And because—I think you may yet save the Trylla."

"You are *ardth*!"

"It makes no difference. What are you, for that matter?"

"I—I don't know."

He did not know. Always that uncertainty tugged at the core of him. Unknowingness within him, like an emptiness. Who are you, Tyr? What are you? And mad laughter answered, "You do not know. You will never know what you are. A god? Ho! Not you, not Tyr."

She saw the blankness in his eyes, and the misery. Her voice was soft, tender. "Tyr, can't you see? You are—Tyr."

He shook his head, heart dull within his chest.

She cried between a laugh and a sob, "But you are the first, Tyr, the first of your kind! I can tell you that. You are a biochemical newcomer."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. No one knows. *You* have to prove it to yourself first. *You* have to learn about you, and then others will know. Who can best understand a new thing but the thing itself! Explore yourself, Tyr—and know!"

Katha hooked a finger in the black braid of her belt and made traceries in the sand with the toe of her sandal. "I had to come and find you. I could not let you die. Besides, there is something in what you do. If the Trylla could be made friendly to the *ardth* they would help us. Perhaps they

could find the way to keep the Glows from dying. The *ardth* need help. You might be the agent to bring *ardth* and Trylla together."

From the depths of his bitterness, Tyr laughed harshly.

"I am but one against the *ardth*. I have no allies. Even the Trylla turn their faces from me. The only thing that keeps me going is the thought that a god must protect his people. Even if they hate him."

"Then think of the rewards that the Trylla may reap, if you unite them with the *ardth* in friendship. The *ardth* are not only conquerors, but colonizers as well. In the far-flung span of cities that spread from the home planets fanwise beyond even Fornax, there are many marvels.

"You have never been to Zafega on Fornalhaut-2. You have not beheld the creata-screens, where your dreams become reality, where the deeps of the subconscious are caught in graphs and translated into pictures. That is incredible beauty, and horror in one! No one is ever the same, having beheld his dreams in a waking moment.

"Then there are the historays that recapture the past, making a living, breathing thing of it. You could see the history of all Lyallar, Tyr, from its primordial beginnings until the—"

Tyr whispered roughly, "That sight would make me realize even more bitterly what it means to be a Tryllan—and alive—these days."

Katha turned her back to him, looking across the rock and sand to a distant fringe of silver trees. Tyr bit his lip, staring at her shapely shoulders. Fool! To alienate the one person on all the planet who cared whether—

An old face lying on the ground, his eyes saw. Gaunt brown cheeks, and sparse grey hair on a round skull. Harl. The ancient one with a brain filled with the magic of war and the knowledge of sciences lost to all the Trylla, other than himself. Harl was dead.

IV

KATHA KILLED HIM. That was why she was here. She cared not a fig for his chances of freeing the Trylla. She was a spy. And he believed her talk

of screens and luxuries and the joys of joining the *ardth*!

His hand vised at her wrist and twisted her around to face him. Her black eyes went wide, frightened at the mad rage in his face. Under the grip of that hand, her knees dug into the sand.

"You murdered him. You—"

"No! Oh, no, Tyr! His heart stopped from excitement. He — he thought the *ardth* had found the Barrow. It is the Barrow, isn't it?"

"Yes," he muttered numbly, looking away from her toward the receding, confusing arches.

Accuse her again, Tyr. Do not let those big black eyes fool you. She is a traitress, is she? She is a spy, instead. Accuse the one thing on all Lyallar that believes in you. Smash her belief. Kill her with your hands. Stand alone, as always you have done.

"No!" he moaned, swaying on big legs, widespread.

The woman knelt, looking up at him.

His eyes closed as thoughts rocketed across his brain. She killed Harl. *She wears no gun, his body bears no mark of violence!* She is a spy for Mason, and will betray you. *She has come alone to you!* Kill her, and be safe. Trust not in your strength to fight what may come.

He put out his big hands and caught her shoulders. He lifted her up and held her against him. He rained kisses on her soft mouth.

She stirred after a while, gently.

She whispered, her black head nestled to his chest, "You love me, Tyr?"

"Yes."

"You came to the Barrow, Tyr. Let us do what you would have done. Rumor has it that there are weapons inside."

"Harl was the only one who knew their use."

She rubbed her arms with her palms, loving the bruise where his hands had dwelt. She chided, "Fie, darling. A god can understand any weapon." And when he glanced sharply to seek mockery in her eyes, she said simply, "I mean it. You can understand them, if you will. Your mind is different. Try it!"

As they went beneath the myriad arches, their feet stepping loudly on the marble flooring in the stillness, Tyr said, "If I

cannot use these weapons the cause of the Trylla is forever lost."

A labyrinth of strange things and objects, set on shelf and counter, under glass and on metal. Mazes of plasticite and steel, glittering and glimmering, shadowing cones and tridents and metal circlets. And none of it was even remotely understandable to the brown giant who stood and stared.

Katha slipped a hand into his and said, "You can do it, Tyr. Yes, you can!"

He shook his head, but he went and stood before the machines. With narrowed eyes, he studied curving generators and domed turbines. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he began to understand them. If only—

A beam of yellow sunlight swam through a glassine vent in the wall, quivering, moving. It touched Tyr, laving his brown face and dark hair in its radiance. The sunlight was hot and soothing. Tyr smiled faintly, knowing that the light was opening the secret facets of his brain, feeding energy to them, making his mind work whether he wanted it to or not.

He was understanding these silent machines, now.

He touched a button, and watched an engine throb and hum, coming to life. Where the blue discs were was its outlet. They turned red, and glowed. When they went white, a blast of power would splay out, and he did not want that to happen, yet. He shut the power off.

Katha walked with him. "You know?" she asked softly.

"I know."

"There is a kitchenette off to one side," she said. "I am going to prepare food for myself. Then tell me your plans!"

When she left him, Tyr turned back to the metal giants, touching levers and rods. He lost himself in their intricacies as a boy does with new and complicated toys.

He did not hear Katha cry out from the next chamber. He did not hear the footsteps. He did not see the girl who came with Gaarn and Trexel to stand in the doorway, a solar gun in her white hand.

A BALL of flame exploded amid the coils and antennae of a big machine. Another fell onto a huge dynamo. Still another whistled shrilly as it clove a path through cones and hoops.

Tyr whirled, but it was too late. Fay was firing rapidly, as fast as she could depress the stud. The yellow blasts ate and drank their way through the machines until every one lay smashed and wrecked.

Tyr laughed bitterly.

"Destroy your every chance," he said. "Your freedom lies on the floor, amid those twisted metal things."

Fay lifted the gun aid aimed it at him. She said coldly, "The *ardth* shall never receive our weapons, Tyr. I destroyed them before you could bring the *ardth* to them."

"I would never bring the *ardth*: What mad poison eats in your brains, you Trylla? Without weapons, what may I do?"

"The Old Ones shall never get them!"

"The Old Ones do not need these things. They have better ones. A hundred years ago they beat men who used these weapons. In that time they have new weapons, better weapons! What would the *ardth* want with things like these?"

There was doubt in the eyes of some, but Fay lifted her gun. Tyr walked toward her, seeing the red hate in her eyes. Her finger touched the stud and balls of yellow fire leaped for him, splashed across his chest.

He went on, unstoppable. The energy from the yellow balls poured into him. Muscles rippled on his arms as he reached out and took the gun away from her.

With white hand pressed to her writhing mouth, Fay stared at him in dumb awe. Tyr wrapped his fingers around the gun. The metal crumpled in his hand. When he opened his hand the remnants bounced on the floor.

Tyr put a hand to Fay's shoulder and pushed her aside. Gaarn and young Texel watched him with fascinated, frightened eyes. He lunged into the chamber where Katha had cried out.

"Katha!" he called.

She lay on a long white table, and there were strong steel straps holding her. Her clothing was somewhat torn. Her dark eyes met his from the corners as her red mouth smiled a little.

"I tried to warn you. The Trylla do not like the *ardth*. They wanted me alive to learn secrets from me." She made a grimace. "I don't know whether I could have stood up to torture."

"There's no need of it, now," he

grunted, putting his hands under the straps and bursting them. He lifted her and held her on his chest.

"I am no longer god of the Trylla," he rasped bitterly, looking down at her. "I am hated by them. Now I am—nothing!"

She was very round and soft on his ribs. Tyr tightened his arm, watching her mouth. Katha made a face and mocked him.

"Man or god—you hurt!"

He eased his arms a little, still holding her tightly. He went down the corridor of the arches as Fay and the others watched from the shadows. His footfalls were soft, but deadly. It was as though his feet intoned a *danse macabre* for the Tryllan race.

Tyr carried the girl to her jet plane that had been hidden among the rocks. He lifted her into it and swung up, both hands on the smooth plasticine handles. The door clicked behind him.

Katha dropped into a red leather seat before an intricate control-board. Her white fingers touched pins. The ship rumbled and shuddered. Slowly it trundled forward, gathering momentum. From the port window, Tyr watched the white dome of the Barrow falling away below. He turned his eyes to the front, seeing her lift the plane over a fringe of *hibithus*-trees to arrow into the cloudless sky.

"Katha, I am homeless."

Homeless and a wanderer, without a people. The Trylla had been his people, if a god ever had people. Now they had turned against him, broken with him, even tried to kill him. There was bitterness on his tongue and in his heart. A bitterness that burned and galled.

From the depths of his anguish, he cried, "I want to be a part of something, Katha! I am neither Tryllan nor *ardth*. What am I?"

The woman caught his hand and pressed it to her lips. She whispered softly, "To me you are always a god, Tyr. I love you. You love me."

"I have you. Yes, that makes up for everything else."

He sighed, "But I keep telling myself that I have failed. That I have not done all I could to free the Trylla."

"What of the tower, Tyr? You said it had strange things in it. Perhaps it is a

laboratory, of sorts. I might make tests there, of you, seek to know your purposes, your abilities."

"Yes, the tower. I'd forgotten that. It could be a home to us. An *ardth*-woman and a—an unknown!"

"I am *ardth* no longer. I gave that up when I came after you. I knew what I was doing."

He knelt and caught her to him, saying, "There is no place for either of us, except with the other. Two wanderers."

"Two wanderers," she sighed. "With a purpose. A mad, insane belief in themselves. To fight even when there is no chance of victory!"

THE TOWER stood gaunt and lonely, rising up into a blue sky. Baked dirt powdered into clouds under their feet as they walked toward it. The tower was strong and thickly built, and it towered above the flat earth in its loneliness. In that respect, it was a little like Tyr himself, Katha thought. She studied the flat buttresses and arched windows.

"An *ardth*-man built that," she said.

"If he did, he made it a laboratory and home at the same time."

Katha furrowed her thin black brows. "But what *ardth* ever built such a tower on Lyallar?" she wondered.

Tyr pushed open the big wooden door. The round room was walled with dials and panels, cool and dim. It gave off a faint and musky smell. A circular table was covered with vials and belljars and retorts. Shelves lined the walls, and bottles lined the shelves. At the far side of the room, a metal stairway twisted its way to the upper floors.

Katha wandered around, delight shining in her eyes. She lifted vials and smelled at chemicals. Laughter gurgled in her throat.

"But this is marvelous. It's almost as complete as my own lab. Now who built this place, Tyr? Can you tell me?"

He showed her a big book bound in tooled leather.

"William Rohrig!" she cried at sight of the golden letters stamped into the cover. "Why — why, he was an *ardth* genius! We often wondered what became of him! He was to travel to Antares, to study life conditions on one of its outer

planets. Commander Mason would be delighted—"

She broke off, glancing sideways at Tyr.

He said, "If it were not for me, you could go back. You could go anyhow. I—"

Her white palm covered his mouth. "Don't say it, Tyr. We'll see this through, you and I."

"If there were only some way in which I could convince the *ardth* that they and the Trylla could live in peace! The Trylla mistrust me and the *ardth* hate me, for I threaten their power. Katha, Katha! There is no answer."

"There is always an answer to a problem. The only trouble is, it takes a long time to see it."

While Tyr worked at the table, making tests and experiments under Katha's guidance, to test the powers of his mind, Katha made the tower her own. Sunlight bathed Tyr through an open window. Above him he heard her footsteps going to and fro, heard her lifting things, and the squeals of delight when she unearthed notebooks that had once been Rohrig's.

They spent their days in work and laughter. Katha made many tests on him, saying, "You are a biological miracle, darling. I don't know much about miracles, so I have to learn, slowly and gropingly."

BUT she never completed her findings. For one day she discovered, tucked into a corner of the big desk on the second floor, a dusty old diary. For three hours she sat entranced with it, never stirring, until Tyr came hunting her, anxious over her silence. He found her with tears in her eyes, her white teeth nibbling at her full lower lip.

She looked up at his entrance, whispering, "Do you know your name, Tyr? Your full name?"

"Tyr. A ring round my neck bore it."

"Those were only your initials. Your real name is Theodore Young Rohrig. Your father was William Rohrig. You are *ardth*, Tyr!"

He stared at her. She clapped her hands, black eyes glowing.

"He knew about you. Oh, he was brilliant, Tyr—or Ted! He knew your function. He called you a mutant, darling. No stomach, no lungs, no need for water. The future man! I can see, now that my eyes

have been opened. It is Nature, striving all the time for perfection, equipping her products with the necessities to get along in their environments! In you she is fitting man for space travel, darling!

"Out there among the stars, without lungs and with no need for food or water, you could strip a ship down and really travel. Light-years wouldn't mean a thing to you. Just a battery of sun-lamps to feed you. You wouldn't age hardly at all, for you derive your heat from outside sources, instead of generating it in your tissues, as normal men do! Your organs merely transmit the heat and energy into your muscles and brain. There is no food to be digested and churned into energy, to be broken into heat-energy in the cells. Your energy comes from outside!"

"You make it sound important."

"It is important! I feel I don't understand *how* important you really are."

Grimly he said, "Now if only we could convince the *ardth* and the Trylla of that!"

Katha caught his arm, saying fiercely, "Tyr—Ted—oh, I'll call you Tyr! You can't give up. You must fight. The *ardth* are fighters, Tyr. Your father was a fighter. He came here with his wife because he had space leprosy! That's right. And his wife came with him. You were born on Lyallar—far, so far from your home planet. He died a long time ago, did William Rohrig, but his fighter's heart didn't die."

A red fingernail stabbed into the flesh of his chest. "That heart is in you, Tyr. It wants to fight. Maybe it doesn't know how, but you are sad only for that reason. You aren't fighting!"

Tyr whispered hoarsely, "Tell me how, Katha. How shall I fight?"

"How do you want to fight? What does your heart and your brain tell you?"

He stood and let the sunlight hit his forehead. It grew hotter and hotter as he stood there, and inside his skull he felt something stirring, and knew it for his opening brain. *Fight them where they are most vulnerable, Tyr. Hit them at their core!* The inner voice that was his thought whispered again, *Destroy the Glow!*

"I must destroy the Glow," he said to her.

Katha shuddered, whispered in horror, "You cannot! You would die from it

long before you ever came to it. The Glow is terrible, awesome, Tyr!"

The sunlight made a pattern on his chest as he turned. "Nevertheless, that is what I must do."

The woman bowed her head and took his hand.

THE CITY OF MART sprawled like a lazing slug upon the prairie. Aircraft sped across its walls, winging into illimitable distances. The deep hum of tradesmen's voices as they called their wares mingled with the smooth roll of gyrocars, rising to form the soul of the great metropolis. Armed guards clanged along the tops of the pyramidal walls.

A tall man clad like a mountain shepherd, in wool cloak and hood, stalked beside a woman who went with downbent head, clinging to his arm. Once in a while the woman whispered to him, and the man made a turn into a different street.

They had dust on their cloaks and dust on their feet, those two. Occasionally the woman stumbled, for she was a born actress. Yet an airplane lay less than three miles from the city walls, hidden by boughs torn from *hibithus*-trees.

"We are almost at the Commune," whispered the woman.

"There are no people here," the man said.

"Your Trylla approach not near to the building that houses the Glow. They fear it too much."

They went faster, lengthening their steps. Opposite a tall white building that had *ardth* lettering graven into its stone, they slowed and the woman spoke again.

"That is where the Glow is, hidden deep in the bowels of earth beneath the Citadel. Always are there guards there. They must be overcome."

The man threw back the cloak, revealed big chest and long arms naked under it. Head flung back, he studied the building eagerly.

"They will be overcome!"

The cloak fell to the flagging and the golden giant was gone in long strides that carried him to the doors of the Citadel and within them. The woman stood watching, then bent and lifted his fallen cloak, threw it over her arm, and followed.

Inside the darkness of the Citadel, Tyr

went on bare feet, with uncanny silence. A guard came toward him, and he darted into the shadows. When the guard was five paces away, Tyr struck.

He lowered the guard, and went on. Voices came from ahead of him.

"This Tyr will know how strong are the *ardth* when he learns what has befallen Zarman!"

"Aye! I wonder what has become of him? Is he dead?"

"Not he. He bides his time. He hopes for a rising of the Trylla!"

"With Zarman and his crew to be executed today, what chance have the Trylla?"

Tyr was turned to stone. His heart hammered inside his chest. Zarman to die! But how had the *ardth* taken him? Once captured, he would be twice as wary! His hands lifted in the shadows toward the guards, but he held them still.

Tyr swung about and went on.

He did not know of the men outside in the street who halted suddenly and looked at Katha excitedly. Their footfalls as they ran across the street toward her went unheard by him as he raced along the corridors of the Citadel.

Katha had no chance to scream. A wrist jammed her throat and an *ardth* voice whispered, "Traitor!"

Tyr ran on.

A heavy throb pounded through the steel corridors, and along the polished runways, and into the panelled rooms of the Citadel. Deep down, seemingly in the guts of the planet, came the monotonous, frightening beat and thunder of the Glow, pulsing in a powerful rhythm. Not many men stayed long in this building, and the guards were changed every few hours. No one had run into it with such gladness as did Tyr, ever.

His feet barely touched the floor as he ran. He flexed his muscles, testing his strength. He was fit and ready from a week of lying in blazing sunlight, from basking under sunlamps arranged by Katha to aid her in her tests.

A guard saw him and yanked at a gun, but Tyr took his face in the palm of his hand and banged his head against the polished steel wall, and left him twitching but alive. Tyr ran swiftly now, heading down and always downward along the ramps, deeper into the earth.

The farther he went, the more sullen grew the throb and roar. It pounded at the temples, shook the walls, surging all around.

On a lintel before a metal elevator was inscribed an *ardth* word. Tyr knew it to be the warning of the Glow. But he put out his hand and opened the elevator door and stepped within. He threw the switch.

There was a falling sensation for a moment, but that passed as Tyr walked around his little cell, working his arms and legs. He was tense and excited, waiting, waiting. This was to be the test. Katha said if he lived through it, that it would be the most marvelous sensation of his entire life. That it would, in some alchemic way, transmute him.

It was warm now. The car was falling faster and faster. Tyr wondered why the *ardth* bothered to have a car at all. If the Glow was all rumor had it to be, the *ardth* would have to build a new car every time this journey was taken. But the ritual of the thing! The *ardth* must maintain their superstitious hold on the Trylla.

He smiled. The *ardth*! They were his race, a people that called a planet called Earth their home. It sounded so like the Tryllan word *ardth*, meaning old, that the Trylla had always called them that. Even the Earth-men accepted the term.

Hot was the car, like some monstrous bubble of fiery air. The light, yellow and brilliant and blinding, came seeping in through cracks in the jointures of the door.

The metal of the car was turning red, deepening to a cherry rose, fading to a cold blue, dawning to a pale white . . .

* * * * *

In the Auditorium of Ancestors, Space Commander Mason sat languidly on the highbacked ivory throne under an arched canopy. Sprayed fanwise before him were gorgeously uniformed *ardth* officers, stiff-backed as they faced the girl with black hair and black eyes.

Fifteen feet from the throne, Katha stood with head flung back, smiling at Commander Mason. "Your men are efficient, Space Commander," she said "They found me on the street."

"There is no one as lovely as Katha among the *ardth*," smiled Mason. "There is no one as treacherous, either."

"I fled to Tyr because I felt him to be of help to us. He is—and will be a help. He has gone now to destroy the Glow."

Mason was out of his seat in one tremendous explosion of speed. His hands caught her arms.

"Destroy the Glow? Are you mad? Is he? Nothing can destroy the Glow! What secret does he know?"

"No secret, other than himself. He is Tyr."

Mason clenched a fist, saying, "You said he could help us. It is no help to destroy the Glow!"

"He cannot destroy it. He will learn that!"

"I think he will, too. It will destroy him, long before he reaches it. But I have spoken enough with you. You must die for actions performed detrimental to the *ardth* welfare."

Space Commander Mason clapped his hands. Guards entered a doorway, and behind them came ragged men with flogged backs, bleeding, wearing manacles. Katha started toward them, before Mason caught her.

She called, "Which of you is Zarman?"

A big man lifted a face swollen with beatings. His eyes were sullen as he looked across the room, at a group of Trylla clad in rainbowed silk garments. Otho smirked beside Fay, who wore a gigantic emerald necklace on her white throat. Her hand fingered it lovingly. On her hand gleamed a golden ring with the letters TYR engraved on it.

"She bears the ring of Tyr," rasped Zarman. "She came to us with a lying message and we believed her. She led us to—the *ardth*!"

Fay tossed her blonde curls indifferently, and glanced down at the necklace that once had belonged to Queen Yatha-sath.

Commander Mason cleared his throat.

"Take them all, including Katha, to the Square of Dying. We will witness their hanging together."

* * * * *

Tyr laughed aloud and stretched, feeling a mad inferno of fire bathing him. His pores were opening, one by one, accepting that insane incandescence with a strange and alien hunger. A man would have died in madness long ago, but Tyr did not die.

He watched the metal of the car weep

itself into globous molten droplets of metal that bulged and oozed and bubbled. A cable parted, and the car plunged free.

There was brightness here, all around him as he watched the car flare in riotous colors. The iridescent hues of red and blue and white flashed for a quivering instant, then puffed into mist that was like a bath of minute motes of color.

Tyr reached for an outcropping of volcanic rock, and clung to it. He lifted himself, and stood on a stone ledge.

Beneath him, suspended in a mighty chasm, was the Glow.

The Glow was a tiny sun!

It hung in an endless abyss. It pulsed and throbbed and quivered, and shot streamers of fire upwards and around it. From its moving core, the leaping tongues shot out, expending its energy and, by its own inconceivable heat, restoring the elements to begin the process all over again.

Many ages ago, the Earthmen discovered solar energy. When deVries invented the multilinear umbra-cell, he discovered that it would hold hordes of hydrogen atoms that could be heated to a point that made them an atomic sun. From these bits of power scientists built small suns of their own, and hung them in deep abysses. From their everlasting power they sapped the energy needed to drive their machines and light their homes. They fed the solar power through tentacles of spun carborungsten into generators and dynamos.

The Earthmen took these suns with them across the voids, to planets like Lyallar, and strung them in their deepest chasms. And where went the suns, they were objects of dread and awe.

This one was no object of dread to Tyr.

Standing on the lip of rock, he laughed and raised his arms, and felt that titanic heat and energy flow directly into him. Tyr had no need for carborungsten cables to power the dynamo of his body. The follicles of his skin opened their hungry mouths and sucked that energy into him.

Tyr was changing, standing there.

He was becoming energy itself, every pore and organ of him filling to capacity with the heat and light of that glowing orb. He was charged to bursting.

Tyr turned to the jagged stone wall, and began to climb.

* * * * *

A gallows stood in the Square of Dying, lifting its black arms toward a blue sky. From the crosspiece hung plasticine nooses, like silvery webs. Men and one woman stood below those hoops of transparent plastic, on a raised platform.

Space Commander Mason said to Katha, "You realize now that your man-god Tyr is nothing compared to the *ardth*?"

"Tyr is the only hope the *ardth* have," she whispered. "I have told you his father was William Rohrig."

"A tale calculated to amaze me. I do not believe you."

"I told you how his body is different, that it can sop up solar energy and translate it into terms of human energy without wear or tear on his system. That he is future man, man in a body fitted to venture out in space, far beyond where we have gone."

"I still do not believe."

A man came and looped the noose around the woman's neck. She shook her head when he would have covered it with a purple mask.

"I tell you now, Commander Mason, that the only one who can renew the Glows is Tyr. Our electro-astrogines have informed us that the elements needed to make new Glows exists only on the planets close to the great suns. Every expedition we sent to those planets perished of heat before they reached them.

"One man could make such a trip—Tyr."

Mason grinned at her. "You're mad, Katha. Executioner, throw the bolt." The executioner put his hand on the lever and swung it over.

* * * * *

Tyr climbed the black rock swiftly. Hands and feet felt for and found niches in the rough surface. Up and up he went. Once he stood on a narrow ledge and craned his neck, staring at the blackness where the carborungsten cables gaped their dark orifices. He was going up there, to those cables, and rip them out. He would smash the dynamos, and nothing could stop him.

Over the lip of a metal cable-mouth he went, and his hands showed bright in the darkness as he seized the wires and pulled, ripping them from welded sockets. He tore and broke with his glowing hands, passing

them under and over the cables, and tearing.

As he destroyed, he walked. With his fists he battered against a wall of metal and splintered it. He stepped through and walked toward the dynamos that were lazily rotating. Some of them already had come to a halt.

Tyr touched the engines with his hands and summoned the energies of his body. The metal cracked under the strain of that superhuman power. Casings split and bearings crumpled.

Tyr walked on.

THE EXECUTIONER threw the lever, and nothing happened. Katha laughed softly, and there was a light in her dark eyes that made Space Commander yearn.

She whispered, "He has won!"

Mason roared, "Throw the auxiliary engines over!"

But the auxiliary engines were dead, too. Now the *ardth*-men murmured and whispered among themselves, for the unnatural quiet of the Citadel was hammering their eardrums.

Footsteps sounded on the flagging.

Something tall and something bright was crossing the Street of Space and entering the Square. It was shaped like a man, but its gleaming yellowness was so brilliant that it hurt the eyes to see it.

"Tyr!" screamed Katha.

Space Commander Mason shuddered and put a trembling hand across his eyes. He looked smaller, frail in his dark cloak, standing before the giant who was coming toward him. His officers fell away from him as Tyr came on. To one side a girl with an emerald necklace dropped and lay in a huddled heap on the ground.

From the throats of the manacled Tryllans a roar went up.

"Our god has come for vengeance!"

"Yield, you *ardth*! Yield to Tyr!"

"See how he shines in his glory!"

Twenty feet from Mason, Tyr came to a stop, for fear that the heat his body emanated would blast the man.

"Free Katha and Zarman and the others," the yellow giant said.

Mason nodded.

"Stay away from me," he warned Katha, seeing her leaping from the dais of the gallows. "I am still overcharged with energy. It will fade in a little while. Wait."

Tyr looked at Mason.

"Zarman will be governor of Lyallar. Otho must die. Fay—Fay will be banished for her treachery. Let her keep the emeralds. She will die if we take them from her. The Trylla will live in peace and friendship with the Earth peoples. It is my order."

Zarman came forward and held out his hand to Space Commander Mason who took it thoughtfully. The man with the bald head swung on Tyr.

"Then it is true what Katha said? You can go near a sun? It makes your body like—that?"

"It fills it with heat and light. And heat and light are energy. My body is energy, right now. Later, that peak of pure energy will fade. It will resume its normal look. But potentially, it is always as you see it now . . . needing only a sun to make it so."

Katha looked at Mason, across the cobblestones of the square.

She said, "I told you Tyr is the one to renew the Glows. He would not die on a planet near enough to the sun for the elements we need."

"I will do that," agreed Tyr. "I am no longer god of the Trylla. I brought them their freedom. I have discharged the responsibility they put about my shoulders when they made me their god."

"My father was *ardth*. I, too, am *ardth*. If I can save the *ardth*, I shall."

He turned toward Commander Mason and said. "And, being an *ardth*, I am under your orders, sir."

Mason drew a deep breath, took off his hat and ran his hand over his bald head. His face wrinkled with amazement, changing to a shy smile.

"My orders, Tyr? Hmm. The first thing you ought to do is—cool off. Then, when you're able to do it safely, take this woman Katha into your arms and kiss her for her belief in you! After that—you might consider mating with her. Your children will carry a torch, Tyr. To the true ends of the world."



"Faster," he cried. "If we don't get back to the igloo we're done for!"

Love Among The Robots

By EMMETT McDOWELL

Henry Ohm, staid scientist, found he couldn't keep his mind on his work—with that girl around. Such was the development of her—ah—personality that even the robots began getting ideas!

HENRY OHM leaped to his feet, stared across the intervening ground at igloo number 2, plainly visible through the clear plastic walls. Its door had just been flung violently open.

Then Sofi Jokai scooted out, fled madly across the jagged surface of the asteroid.

Hard on the girl's heels pounded R-7. The robot, Hen saw with a gulp, was waving a large wrench in one metal fist.

"Oh-oh!" Hen muttered and plunged down the incline for the airlock.

He shot a second glance through the transparent curved walls, slowed down. The robot would never catch Sofi. Even burdened by her oxygen suit, the girl was leaving R-7 far in the rear.

At the airlock, Henry Ohm paused, regarding the chase with sober, deep-set black eyes. He was a tall, thin young man, nearing thirty. His face was narrow; prominent cheek bones and a thin, straight nose gave his features an angular pleasant mould. He made no move to don the emergency oxygen helmet beside the lock, but waited with a vague expression of annoyance.

Sofi reached the airlock, burst inside, sealed and locked the outer door behind her. The air had scarcely filled the chamber before she flung open the inner door, confronted Henry Ohm, and exploded into a flood of angry words. Not a sound escaped her plastic helmet which she had forgotten to remove.

He let her rattle away silently inside her helmet, nodding at intervals, rubbing his chin until she paused for breath.

"That's what you get for trying to run a mine all alone on this god-forsaken asteroid," he informed her, "even if you are a yellow-haired hell cat."

Sofi looked at him blankly.

Ohm rapped with his knuckles on her helmet. "If you'd take that thing off, you could hear me. But you're the excitable type. Probably have an overactive thyroid."

Sofi jerked off her helmet. She had a mass of fine wavy yellow hair cut like a halo about her oval face. Her features were delicately moulded, her eyes large and blue. She was only a few inches shorter than Henry Ohm, but more slenderly built.

"What the hell were you saying?" she demanded suspiciously.

"I wanted to know what you'd been doing to the robots this time?"

"Me?"

"What happened in the mine?"

"Rational robots!" Sofi Jokai planted hands on slender but ample hips. "I was an idiot to listen to you, Hen."

He repressed a chuckle. His glance flicked to the surface of the asteroid beyond the plastic walls of the igloo. R-7, he saw, had taken a stance at the lock like a cat at a mouse hole.

ALTHOUGH BUILT along the general design of man, the robot was no grotesque copy. He was a complex functional piece of machinery as beautiful in his way as the cobwebby spans of a bridge, a streamlined jet plane, or a fine watch.

"But Sofi, they're still in the experimental stage. They—"

"Experimental's right," the girl interrupted passionately. "D'you realize what R-7 has done now?"

He grinned. "No. What?"

"He's taken the mining worm apart—that's what. I knew he would!"

"Knew he would? Did you warn him not to?"

"Yes. Of course I did. I had to leave him to check the reduction plant. I had a presentiment . . ."

"Woman's intuition, I suppose," Hen interrupted. "You'd sold yourself on the idea R-7 was going to take the worm apart."

"If you like," returned Sofi in a chilly voice. "When I came back, R-7 was gone and the worm was strewn all over the floor. I was furious. I found R-7 on the fourth level. I started to land into him, but—but—"

"But what?"

"He looked so queer."

"How the hell can a piece of machinery look queer?"

"Well, he did," said Sofi indignantly. "He looked as if he was going to take me apart, too!"

Henry groaned. "Go on," he said resignedly.

"Why, then R-7 wanted to know if I was put together or if I came all in one piece." She bit her lip. "He started to find out."

She slipped off the oxygen suit. She was clad in comfortable baggy coveralls similar to Hen's.

"That rascal," Hen chuckled. Sofi grew pink with rage.

"Rascal!" she retorted witheringly. "Is that all you can say? One of those mechanical monstrosities dismantles the worm, then starts on me—and you think it's cute!"

"Well, it's damned queer they always react emotionally when you're around."

Sofi set her jaw, began to stride up the

incline. She was a rangy girl with a long pantherish stride. Hen followed her, his brow furrowed.

When they came out on the sun deck of the two-storied half-sphere of clear plastic that was the living quarters, he began, "I'll take a look at the mining worm. I think I can get it reassembled all right." He frowned, cracked his bony knuckles. "The robots have been developing some unexpected quirks. I wouldn't be surprised, Sofi, if this tinkering with machinery isn't the expression of a sexual urge. The emergence of an instinct to perpetuate the species . . ."

"Sexual urge!" Sofi Jokai halted before Hen, shook her finger under his nose. "If I could sneak up behind R-7, he'd never make calf-eyes at another mining worm!"

But Hen wasn't listening. He fumbled in the pockets of his coveralls, resurrected a notebook, wrote: "Robots manifesting decided curiosity towards machinery. May be emergence of secondary sex characteristics." He frowned, added in bold script: "Have noted nascent antipathy towards organic life." Again he hesitated, then scrawled: "Shows signs of developing into active antagonism." He snapped the notebook shut, jammed it in his pocket.

"Where are you going," Sofi asked as he started for the door.

"Get my oxygen suit. I want a look at their mining worm."

"You'd better take a crowbar along to fend off R-7."

"Poor psychology," Hen replied with more confidence than he felt. "Fear and coercion'll only cause their antagonism to become firmly implanted. The rational robot, Sofi, can be either the greatest single step man has made towards freedom or . . ."

"Or what?"

"Enslavement!" It sounded sententious after he had said it. But it was true. He started for the door again.

"What do you mean by that crack?" Sofi stopped him.

He didn't answer her directly. Instead, he replied: "I'm not sure that Robots Incorporated didn't make a mistake when they selected this asteroid as a proving ground. It's too . . ."

"Don't you go turning in any report like that!" interrupted the girl hotly.

SOFI JOKAI had been operating her wildcat uranium mine on a shoestring before Robots Incorporated approached her with their proposition. Now the corporation was paying all the operational expenses so that the proceeds of the mine were pure gravy. Further, they had guaranteed that any improvements which they installed would automatically revert to Sofi when the experimental units were withdrawn. Machinery damaged by the robots was to be replaced at the corporation's expense. A substantial bonus to compensate for the risk involved was included. Robots Incorporated hadn't even overlooked Henry Ohm, their experimental physicist, whom they'd sent along to check the robots. Sofi was to get a monthly check to cover Henry Ohm's board, lodging and nuisance value.

"Hell," said Sofi, "R-7 can chase me twice around the asteroid before breakfast. Just because I blew my top about the mining worm doesn't mean . . ."

"That's got nothing to do with it," Hen said grimly. The asteroid's too well adapted to the robots' needs. Airless, waterless, an abundant supply of metals. There's the laboratory. Your mine and equipment. And only the two of us as a check on them."

"Check?" Sofi's blue eyes had gradually widened. "What are you driving at?"

"Why do you suppose Robots Incorporated chose this asteroid as a proving ground?"

"They—they said the mine would afford an opportunity to observe how well the robots adapted themselves to actual working conditions."

"That's not all. They wouldn't let you go into this blind."

"No," she admitted nervously. "They mentioned something else that struck me at the time, but it was too golden an opportunity to pass up. They said that should the experiment prove—ah—impractical, they would have the infection isolated on a small asteroid well out in the belt."

"Exactly. Look, I helped develop these robots. I've been on the problem seven years, but it was started long before I joined the experimental staff of Robots Incorporated." He paused.

"In fact," he went on dryly, "they were predicted even before science had

advanced to a point where it could set up the intricate nervous system necessary. A conscious machine, Sofi, is the result of fusing two sciences which have always been considered more or less antagonistic."

"You mean psychology and physics?"

Sofi had begun to pace nervously up and down the room.

He nodded.

"It was a logical deduction from mechanistic psychology, which itself is an outgrowth of the old school of Behaviorism. Mental life is response to stimulus. Consciousness is like the spark between two electrodes in a circuit of feeling arising from viscera, muscles, blood vessels, glands—"

"Get to the point!" commanded Sofi.

Hen set his jaw. He was sounding like a lecturer, he realized. But it annoyed him for the girl to point it out.

"I'm getting there as fast as I can. We were faced with devising an intricate mechanical nervous system. Thus, should a joint grow warm from lack of lubrication, an impulse of distress could be telegraphed to the central clearing center, identified, shunted to the lubricatory system which would oil the joints. A spark of consciousness would be created. It would manifest itself as acute distress in the defective joint.

"We incorporated a simple metabolism by which the robots converted raw stuff into fuel and lubrication. The rest of the mechanism was much the same as that of any animal confronted by the necessity of self preservation. Organs for locomotion and work. Organs for perception."

Sofi frowned. "So?"

"Most things in nature serve multiple purposes. Arms and legs are no exception. They provide offensive as well as defensive weapons. We've succeeded in building a conscious machine without any adequate control."

"But you sound as if you thought it might turn on man," protested the girl with a shudder. "Why should it?"

"For the same reason we built it," he said with a touch of irony. "Freedom. So long as it doesn't learn to reproduce itself, though, it's not a danger. That is, not to the race."

"But a machine! Surely you can forecast how a machine will act!"

"Can we?" His voice was savage. "How would a conscious machine react to its environment? What would its thoughts be? I tell you, once it integrates itself, we have no means of predicting its reactions!"

ONCE in his own quarters, Henry Ohm began dragging on his oxygen suit. He could still see the girl through the glass partitions of the igloo. She had dropped into a chair, lit a cigarette.

"About as private," he thought wryly, "as a gold fish bowl."

The igloos, he knew, were manufactured for housing on the airless asteroids of the belt. They were built of a clear thermal plastic and incorporated heating, atmosphere and water units. Henry Ohm felt rather strongly though that the partitions could have been clouded.

Sofi's holdings had not been designed to accommodate visitors. In fact, Henry Ohm had spent the past week in a state of mild embarrassment.

He settled his helmet over his head, bolted it in place. He glanced toward the living room, but Sofi wasn't there. Then he saw her in her own quarters. She was skinning out of her coveralls, preparing to shower.

"Damn all glass houses," he muttered and bolted for the air lock.

Hen emerged on the surface, swept the tight horizon with his eyes. It was empty of life. R-7 had lost patience, evidently, and wandered off.

To the left was the laboratory and machine shop, a gleaming plastic igloo resembling the living quarters. Robots Incorporated had provided it for him to observe, diagnose, repair his mechanical charges. Beyond the laboratory a somewhat larger igloo housed the mine shaft, reduction plant and tippie. A dilapidated tramp freighter sprawled beside the tippie like a foundered whale.

Hen frowned. Operations had come to a halt. He could catch no glimpse of movement through the plastic walls.

He lengthened his stride, passed through the door, still open just as Sofi had left it when she fled. The interior reminded him of the appearance of a shop from which the proprietor has just stepped to buy a paper.

A subtle feeling of uneasiness began

to pervade his whole being. He descended the shaft in the automatic cage. The light was burning on each of the four levels. Tools had been abandoned and left lying on the floors. He found the dismembered anatomy of the mining worm on level three. But of the eight robots there was no sign.

Hen ran the cage back to the surface at top speed. He was sweating profusely. A trickle kept running off his forehead into his eye. He pawed at the plastic helmet, shook his head. Then perversely his nose began to itch.

It did no good to tell himself these were nervous manifestations. He could only grit his teeth and suffer. He ran outside, glanced hopefully about the surface once more.

The landscape was rough, inhospitable, barren, resembling a clinker on a larger scale. The sun hung just above the western horizon. It was a brilliant but unimposing disc about the size of a dime.

There was still no sign of the robots.

HEN swore softly to himself. In a few minutes it would be dark. It was hopeless to begin a search now. He returned to his quarters in the igloo, shucked off the oxygen suit.

Maybe he could raise them with the radio. The robots' hearing and speaking apparatus extended beyond the range of audible sound into the realm of electromagnetic waves. He went out to the sun deck, switched on the communicator. He was unable to contact them, though. There was no ionized strata of air on the asteroid to reflect the waves back to the surface, and he concluded they had wandered below the horizon.

With a groan, he flung himself into a chair. He pulled the notebook out of his pocket, thumbed through the pages, reading bits here and there.

"... machine thought processes diverging from human at progressively increasing rate... amazing deductive and assimilative faculties. Able to assimilate page of text at a glance. But seem to lack creativeness..."

He paused, frowned, wondering if the inability to perform creative, inductive thinking wasn't a fundamental limitation

of the machine. Organic life differed in four precepts which until a short time ago science had been unable to duplicate. It was able to grow and reproduce itself; it felt emotion and thought.

But the robots appeared to think.

And some forms of organic life didn't feel emotion. Plants, for one. The oviparous man-like bowmen of Venus, who had emerged from the Great Swamp and which a few crackpot visionaries were hailing as homo superior, for another.

Only the ability to grow and reproduce itself seemed inherently organic. The act of conception both in a biologic and mental sense was the birthright of the organism.

With an increase of the uneasiness he had felt since the discovery of the robots' defection, he returned to his notes.

"... robots showing aversion to water, oxygen, corrosive acids; believe to be caused by dread and/or attendant pain of oxidation... have been forced to release air in mine and laboratory and discontinue atmosphere units to induce robots to return to work. Humidity of atmosphere being especially distasteful to them... treated R-3 for mild acid corrosion of right pedal digit. Complained of itching sensation..."

He frowned. How in the hell could a hunk of metal experience an itching sensation? From what source could it have plucked the mental pattern? He came to the end of his notes, wrote: "All work at stand still. Robots have disappeared."

He returned the book to his pocket, elevated his feet on another chair, closed his eyes.

He was still in that position when Sofi streamed out of her quarters with a towel draped about herself.

"Resting the old brain?" she inquired brightly.

Hen opened his eyes, said in a pained voice, "I'm thinking," and closed them again.

"Which end do you use?"

Hen allowed his feet to clomp to the floor, sat up. He said grimly, "The robots have run off."

Sofi's blue eyes widened. "Wait a minute," she said breathlessly and flashed from the room.

Hen kept his eyes studiously on the deck.

The sprawling sun-drenched hives of Terra, he was beginning to realize, insured an impersonal attitude by the multitude of their citizenry. That same impersonalness was disconcertingly hard to maintain when a man and a girl were cooped together on an uninhabited asteroid. The pre-plastic emotions were only too apt to assert themselves.

It distracted him when he felt he needed his full powers of concentration.

Sofi returned in belted coveralls. She took a seat, asking him, "What does it mean?"

"The disappearance of the robots? I don't know. I didn't think they were sufficiently integrated yet to mutiny."

"But what can they do?"

He frowned. "I don't want to sound like an alarmist, but I've pointed out before how suited the asteroids are to them. If once they learned how to duplicate themselves, there'd be no end to them. They have everything here they need to get a fundamental grasp of our science—even to a rocket ship. They could spread through the asteroid belt like a plague."

Sofi bit her lip. Her eyes were opened wide and brilliant. Her cheeks were flushed. She didn't interrupt.

Hen said, "Look what it would mean. An alien, intelligent, almost indestructible race of monsters saddling the planetary system!"

He drove his right fist into his left palm. "A control! That's what we have to discover! A control!"

HEN had no idea what he ate that night at supper. He said suddenly over coffee and cigarettes, "Ceres is approaching an inferior conjunction. If those robots haven't appeared by morning, I'm going to radio the station there for help. Then I'm going to scour every inch of this diminutive world."

"That shouldn't be too difficult for you," Sofi remarked maliciously. "Of course, there's only about two thousand-five hundred square kilometers to cover."

Hen looked disgruntled.

"Maybe they've jumped off," suggested Sofi with a giggle.

He made a remark under his breath.

"Why, Henry! What an idea! You're worrying yourself into a nervous break-

down. Relax. I'll tell you what: we'll play some checkers."

"Checkers!" he snorted. He had played checkers every night since he had been on the asteroid and he didn't even like the game. Besides, the girl always beat him.

Undeterred by his lack of enthusiasm, Sofi began to clear away the dishes and get out the men.

HEN sat back with a pained expression. It was black outside the plastic hemisphere. Only the vivid stars relieved the absence of light. Jupiter, by far the brightest, was visible as a small disc. The lights were still on in mine and lab, but nothing stirred in the two igloos.

"It's your move," said Sofi.

She was seated directly across from him, knees touching his. Her coveralls were open at the neck, and he could see the white pillar of her throat, the swell of her small, high, virginal breasts. He was conscious of his pulse ticking away in his throat, and grew furious with himself. He couldn't concentrate on the game; he couldn't concentrate on the much more serious problem of the robots.

The girl, he felt sure, was aware of her effect on him and used it deliberately to confuse him. He said grumpily, "I can't beat both of you."

"Both of me?"

"Yeah. You and your body."

"Why, what a thought, Hen!" She was obviously trying to hold back laughter. "But I thought you were superior to that sort of thing."

He jumped up from the table, turned his back to the girl staring off through the plastic walls. Immediately all thoughts of Sofi vanished.

"They're back!"

"What?"

"The robots. They've come back. They're in the laboratory. Look."

She came around the table, brushing against him, stared out at the lighted igloo. The heavy man-like machines were moving about inside the laboratory. Hen started for his quarters.

"Where are you going?" Sofi cried sharply.

"Get my oxygen suit."

"Wait. Don't be foolhardy. How do you

know what they're up to? Talk to them first."

Hen hesitated. "All right." He went out onto the sundeck instead, snapped on the communicator.

"R-7," he called. "R-7."

"Here," came the robot's voice through the audio. "Is that you, father?"

"Father?" Hen ejaculated. He heard Sofi giggle. "Where did you get that idea?"

"Didn't you make us, father?"

"Yes," he admitted. Sofi was laughing out loud. "But you didn't think of that yourself."

"The girl told us, father," said the robot.

Hen ground his teeth. That, of course, was Sofi's idea of a joke. "Where have you been?" he asked.

"Prospecting."

"Prospecting for what?"

"Radium, father."

Sofi said, "Ask them if they found anything!" Her voice was eager.

Hen narrowed his black eyes, ignored her. He said to R-7 over the transmitter, "Go back to work at once."

"But you don't work, father."

Hen felt a surge of uncertainty. The robots were too delicately receptive to expect to keep them in ignorance. Their perceptions were infinitely more sensitive than man's. Even on this asteroid there were too many factors involved to regulate their environment. He had tried to implant science without revealing the greater implication of science. But language was too faulty a tool. There was the girl, too—headstrong, excitable, hyper-thyroid. It was amazing how faithfully the robots tended to reflect her emotional instability.

How much of the robots' erraticness originated in Sofi's inexact thinking?

He said, "Everything has to work."

"Why?"

"Man either produces the needs of his body or he dies," he explained with growing irritability. The conversation was progressing further and further out of hand. "In your case, it's fuel and repairs. Without them you would terminate."

"But we have those here, father. Why should we work for you or the girl?"

That was it—the ultimate question which he had foreseen and which he could neither avoid nor answer. It was impos-

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sible to explain the complicated social system in which man, the disinherited, exchanged his labor for a small percentage of the articles he produced. But the robots were self sufficient.

He said with growing desperation, "Either you return at once to work, or I'll terminate you."

"How, father?"

How indeed? Hen fumed inwardly, said with sudden inspiration, "We'll radio for help. There are machines capable of blasting the lot of you into your component atoms."

"But the radio station is here in the laboratory," R-7 pointed out. There was a faint hesitation, then the robot added, "We will terminate you instead." The instrument clicked off.

HEN GULPED, realized in dismay that it hadn't occurred to the robots to destroy them until he had planted it in their minds.

"You are the bright lad," drawled Sofi. "What do you propose now—Brain?"

He turned his black eyes on her, regarded her without seeing her. His glance strayed beyond the girl to the lab.

"What the devil are they doing now?" he cried suddenly.

Sofi spun around. Hen leaped past her to press his nose against the clear plastic walls of their igloo. The robots, he saw, had one of their number clamped on the work bench and were dismantling him.

"Damnation!" he said. "They must be trying to duplicate themselves. You and your silly jokes about fathers."

"Me?"

"What do you think gave them the idea of reproduction? Their thinking never rises above the level of deductive reasoning. They had to derive the idea from an outside source."

"But—but can they do it?"

"Of course they can! It's an intricate job, but they only have to copy themselves. The laboratory and machine shop is complete. They've amassed a staggering knowledge of science."

"But why?" protested Sofi.

Hen shook his head. "It's beyond me. They should adjust readily to whatever line of work they're applied to. They shouldn't evince ambition. Ambition, by its nature, should be impossible to a machine. But that's not the only organic trait they've been developing. It's what Robots Incorporated was afraid might happen."

He snapped his fingers suddenly.

"The freighter! If we can sneak aboard the freighter, we can get to Ceres and bring back an atom gun. If they're developing emotions we may be able to overawe them. If not . . ." He hesitated, his mind drawing back from framing the thought. The truth was that the robots were like children, precocious children. He set his mouth grimly.

"If they don't respond to fear, we can destroy them."

Sofi looked across the darkened interval into the lighted lab where the robots were busy dissecting their fellow and shivered.

"Industrious little monsters!"

Hen said, "Get your oxygen suit."

"Now? You mean we're going to make a dash for the space ship now?"

"Of course now! We've got to clear out of here before they carry out their threat to terminate us!"

THERE WAS no light outside the igloo. House and lab and mine stood out like three jeweled domes, reflecting their rays onto the ragged surface, glinting unexpectedly from upthrust peaks in the distance. Hen and Sofi crouched against the outside of the housing unit, staring across the patchwork of black shadow and light at the lab.

"Don't talk," he cautioned Sofi over the radiophones built into their helmets. "The robots' auditory apparatus is sensitive to radio waves. They may tune in on us."

"What the hell did you try to do? Make them invincible?"

He said, "We tried to build them with controls, but—don't you see?—those were weaknesses, flaws! The machine remained dead. The first law of life is self preservation. We had to make the machine self-regulating, independent, to produce awareness. Now shut up! Don't ask me any more questions."

He led off into the darkness away from the lab, away from the mine and spaceship. It was too risky to attempt passing the lab. The light was apt to reflect from their suits, discover their presence to the robots inside. But by describing a circle he could avoid the lighted areas and come up behind the dilapidated tramp freighter.

He glanced upward at the stars, impressing their position on his mind. The constellations were little altered. He found Polaris in the tail of the little dipper. It was not the axis star as it was on Earth, but it served to fix his sense of direction in the impenetrable blackness.

They tripped and stubbed their toes, stumbled into shallow fissures, climbed sharp-edged crests. Sofi, forgetting the radiophone, muttered several well-chosen expletives to herself. They would have done credit to a spaceman. Hen was so shocked, he forgot to reprimand her.

In a few minutes the lights of the igloos reappeared to guide them, the vast black bulk of the tramp freighter screening part of the mining unit. They crept up to the ship, and hugging its shadow, moved noiselessly towards the port. Light from the reduction plant picked them out

brightly as they came around the stern.

Hen's stomach contracted. There was a sudden bitter taste in his mouth. He halted so abruptly that Sofi bumped against his shoulder.

The port was open. The gleaming functional mechanism that was R-3 stood complacently in the entrance.

The space ship was being guarded.

THE ROBOT caught sight of the humans at the same moment. His reaction, although mechanical, was almost as instantaneous as their instinctive one.

He moved to block the entrance, sent out a call for help.

Hen, guessing his intention, tuned his helmet receiver to the robot's wave length. R-3's mechanical voice rang suddenly inside his helmet.

"... attacking the space ship! Aid! Aid! Father attacking the space ship! Aid!"

Hen switched back to the girl's wave length. "Run," he commanded tersely. "He's calling for help. He'll have the lot of them down on our heads."

Suiting action to words, he took to his heels, plunging for the housing unit.

"Lock ourselves in!" he grunted.

"But the ship!" Sofi wailed over her radiophone.

"Might as well try to get past a tank as R-3," he panted. He saw four of the robots break from the laboratory, turn to intercept them. "Faster," he cried. "If we don't get back to the igloo we're done for! These suits haven't but a seven hours oxygen supply!"

He swung sharply to the right, traveling in sixty-foot leaps like an ungainly grasshopper, to jump completely over the head of the closest robot.

He over-estimated the last jump, smashed into the tough plastic wall of the igloo. He slithered to the ground, half dazed, as Sofi whipped inside, started to close the lock. Hen got his foot in the crack just in time.

"What the hell are you trying to do?" he roared wrathfully. "Lock me out?"

He yanked the door open, flung himself into the compartment. He got it barred just as the robots reached the igloo.

They milled around outside a moment, then trooped back to the laboratory, leaving one of their number, R-6, on guard.

"We're prisoners!" Sofi breathed through the radiophone.

Hen decided it was childish not to speak. He growled, "Yes," in a voice which he hoped conveyed the depth of contempt, but Sofi didn't seem to notice it. Hell, she was probably too frightened to even realize that she had tried to lock him out.

As soon as the pressure reached normal, they left the lock, trooped dejectedly up the incline to the sundeck, and pulled off their oxygen suits.

"Keep them handy," said Hen ominously when Sofi started to put them away. "We'd better get extra oxygen containers, too."

The girl bit her lip. Her cheeks were flushed, her large blue eyes starry with fright. "Then—then you think they'll try to break in here?"

"Of course they will! We're a menace to their continued existence. If we could just get hold of an atom gun, though. R-3 sounded frightened!"

"Frightened?" asked Sofi. She was still breathing heavily, but she had begun to quiet down. "Now who's reading emotion into the robots?"

He said with a puzzled expression, "It wasn't so much the nuance as his choice of words. 'Father is attacking the space-ship! Aid! Aid!' He gave every appearance of being as frightened as we were. It's impossible, but they seem to be developing emotions!"

Sofi dropped weakly in a chair, clasped her arms around her knees. "Why should it be impossible?"

"You sound like R-7." He began pacing the sun deck. "Emotion results from glandular activity. The robots don't have glands."

"They've got their counterparts."

"Maybe," he admitted doubtfully. "You're referring to the metabolism that breaks down the rawstuffs and converts it into fuel, lubrication—that sort of chemical change?"

She nodded.

"I don't know. Anyway, it's worth a try. If they really experience fear, we might be able to bluff them."

"What are you going to do?" she asked breathlessly.

He said, "Remind them that every three Terran months a supply ship puts in here. And if we're harmed they'll be destroyed."

"But what about the space ship? Couldn't they escape to another asteroid? They'd never be located in the belt."

"It shouldn't occur to them," returned Hen thoughtfully. "Not unless the idea reached them from us."

He went to the radio contact, switched it on. "R-7," he called. "R-7."

"Here, father," the voice of the robot issued from the audio.

He said, "R-7, I'm giving you one last chance. Return to work at once or all of you will be terminated."

"How?"

He explained tersely about the supply ship, and what would occur if so much as a hair of their heads was injured. Silence greeted the ultimatum. For a moment Hen wondered if R-7 had switched himself off. Then the robot said, "*We are going to load the ship and hide out in the belt. They'll never be able to locate us.*"

HEN was too stunned to argue. He flipped off the set, sank into a chair. "It's inconceivable," he said, "and monstrous! It just isn't possible!"

"I don't see why," protested Sofi. "It didn't take conception to figure that out. We tried to run away. We set the precedent."

"No, no," he protested. "Not that at all. But the coincidence. We were afraid that might occur to them. And it did! Even the phrasing was ours—yours, to be exact."

"You mean telepathy."

"In a sense. The brain gives off minute electrical discharges that vary with the brain's activity. The robots are sensitive, much more so than man. It takes a machine to detect the brain discharges in the first place."

"But then they're aware of every move we could make just as soon as we are."

"That's just it! They've forestalled us every time." He drove his right fist against his left palm. "You were afraid R-7 would dismantle the mining worm. You planted the suggestion in his mind. Then it occurred to you that he might try to take you apart; so he did. I explained the danger inherent in a conscious machine. The robots incorporated it into their thought processes. We were afraid they would block our escape in the space ship. If we

hadn't been afraid we wouldn't have circled. So they blocked us!"

Sofi's color had heightened. Her eyes looked too large in her delicately modelled face. "Then we're trapped!"

He nodded, said, "If they escape from the asteroid, they'll be a menace to the entire human race."

"The larger problem doesn't interest me," she said bitterly. "How long do we have?"

He shook his head.

"Oh, well," she shrugged, eyes feverishly bright. "Eat, drink and be merry, because tomorrow we die." She giggled half-hysterically.

Hen's nerves were keyed up to the breaking point. The girl screamed, and he almost jumped out of his skin.

"Here they come!"

He wheeled around.

Seven of the robots were advancing on their igloo. Only the eighth was missing, and he lay scattered in parts about the laboratory. They were hauling the heavy cutting torch with them.

"They're going to cut through the walls with the torch," he ejaculated. "I was afraid of that! Get on your oxygen suit!"

"What's the use?" Sofi asked despondently. "They'll kill us anyway."

He turned on her angrily, thought, "Damn these unstable hyper-thyroid types!" An expression of dawning comprehension broke across his long, narrow face. The thyroid was the great energizer, raising the energy level of the brain. And Sofi was hyper-thyroid.

Outside, the robots began setting up the apparatus. A knife of blue flame licked from the muzzle, spattered against the tough plastic.

But Hen was staring at the girl, a queer expression in his black eyes.

"Do something!" she cried, springing to her feet. "Do something!"

The lank physicist swallowed. He took a deep breath. "You asked for it," he breathed, "but, boy, I'm going to feel silly if I'm wrong!"

Then he hit the girl square on the point of her chin with all the bone and gristle of his six-foot frame behind the blow.

Sofi's head snapped back. She collapsed limply in his arms.

Hen laid her out on the floor, leaped

for the communicator, and flipped it on.

The robots were still training the torch on the wall of the igloo, but there was an aimlessness about their movements as if their purpose was gone.

"R-7!" he called. "R-7!"

"Here, father."

"Shut off the torch!"

There was a faint hesitation during which Hen could feel the sweat prickle his forehead. Then, "*Yes, father,*" came the robots unstressed syllables. The blue flame disappeared.

"Go back to work!" He hastily detailed each robot to its operation.

"*Yes, father.*"

The robots turned, disappeared in the direction of the mine.

He had done it! He blew out his breath, dropped limply in a chair. He really ought to look after Sofi, but he'd have to wait until the strength flowed back in his legs.

Sofi was really was out cold. "Wake up," said Hen, "you're not dead." He sprinkled more water over the girl's face.

Her eyelids fluttered. She gazed up at him blankly, then stark terror gleamed from her eyes. "The robots!"

"No more of that!" He shook her roughly. "They're machines. They don't have consciousness; only the semblance of consciousness!"

Sofi sat up, asking, "What—?" in a bewildered voice.

"They don't think! They aren't conscious! They're like a mirror; they reflect what we expect them to do."

"Don't try to tell me that!" cried the girl springing to her feet. "Hell, haven't I seen them thinking? Where are they?"

"They've gone back to work."

"What?" said Sofi. She looked puzzled, passed her hand over her face.

"Don't you see?" Hen broke out jubilantly. "They're sensitive, inordinately sensitive, so sensitive that they even respond to our thoughts. From beginning to end they've done exactly what we—you expected them to do."

"Me?"

He came to a halt, said, "The fact is, you're a rebel, Sofi. If you weren't, do you think you'd be trying to develop independently a mine on an uninhabitable asteroid? Don't you see? You expected

the robots to revolt because you couldn't imagine a rational creature willing to submit to a twenty-four hour work day from which he stood to gain nothing!"

"And I'm responsible for—everything?"

He nodded vigorously. "The robots respond to both of our thought patterns, of course, but primarily to yours. You're hyper-thyroid. The thyroid raises the energy level of the brain. They have done principally what you've expected them to do."

Sofi was recovering amazingly from her fright. She said, "If that isn't just like a man. Blame it on the woman. Even Adam—"

"Nonsense," Hen interrupted. "The robots haven't acted independently once. Not even to finish dismantling that robot in the lab. They went prospecting when you thought how silly it was for them to work for you when they could find a mine of their own."

"They wandered back aimlessly after they lost contact. But by that time I had inadvertently planted the thought in your mind that they were in revolt and would attempt to duplicate themselves."

"They drew on us both, but the dominating influence was yours."

SOFI massaged her sore jaw, raised her eyebrows. "It's too bad only machines respond so cooperatively," she said with a twinkle in her blue eyes.

A grim expression descended over Hen's features. He regarded Sofi pensively. "I'm going to recommend that you be returned to Earth during any further experiments. You're too upsetting an influence—"

"On the robots, of course," Sofi interrupted with a chuckle. "You're much too well-integrated to be swayed by a mere woman—even a hyper-thyroid woman."

"There's a limit to my endurance," said Hen in a grim voice.

Sofi looked startled, but she couldn't resist adding, "Why Henry, I didn't guess you'd been exercising such magnificent self-control!"

She took a sudden backward step as he advanced ominously. "Henry! Now, Henry!"

With a shriek, she turned and fled, Henry Ohm, distinguished physicist, hard on her heels.

TEPONDICON

By CARL JACOBI

He was not the savior-type. He certainly did not crave martyrdom. Yet there was treasure beyond price in these darkened plague-cities of Ganymede, if a man could but measure up to it.

BY SEVEN O'CLOCK, Earth-time, I could distinctly see the first plague city of Profaldo. In the grey light it lay there before me, a vague opalescent aura radiating from its spires and minarets. The three roads that crossed the flat converged on the city to meet at a single narrow runway.

I drove the tracto-car down into a little gully, climbed out and took a second look through my magnoscope. The flat was deserted, as it well should be at this hour, and the only sign of life was a high-flying *tok*, circling slowly.

It took me only five minutes to make preparations for my entrance into Profaldo. The carefully wound coil of volocized wire slipped down neatly under my tunic. Suspended from my left shoulder was a haversack, innocent appearing, but containing one of the seven transmitting sets, also a complete set of tools. I removed three of the white pellets from the little glass vial in my pocket and swallowed them. And, for emergency, I slid a heat pistol into another pocket.

Then I set out across the flat. Distance was deceptive, but I had calculated fairly closely, and an hour later saw me pacing up the runway to the entrance of Profaldo.

The guard in the cubicle stared when I stood before him. "You're not a citizen here," he said. "Do you know what place this is?"

"I know very well," I said, "Here are my papers, signed by the High Ganymedian Council. Let me pass, please."

The gate slid back, and an instant later I was inside the city.

PROFALDO! Plague-ridden, feared, legendary! Like its six sister cities, the place was known throughout the System as a pest-hole, tenanted by doomed citizenry whose very futility of life made a mockery of everything decent and law-abiding.

Twenty yards down the street, and I saw indeed that the city was one vast slum. Gambling holes-in-the-wall stood cheek by jowl with sinister drink shops, all of them roaring full blast. A drooling fog that dimmed the intermittent blue street lights gave a grotesque unreality to the thoroughfare.

Here and there were groups of the inhabitants. Only a few showed visible signs of the horrible plague,—the greenish, leprous hue to the face and eyes, the disjointed, shambling walk—but I knew that all of them had the disease in one or more of its stages.

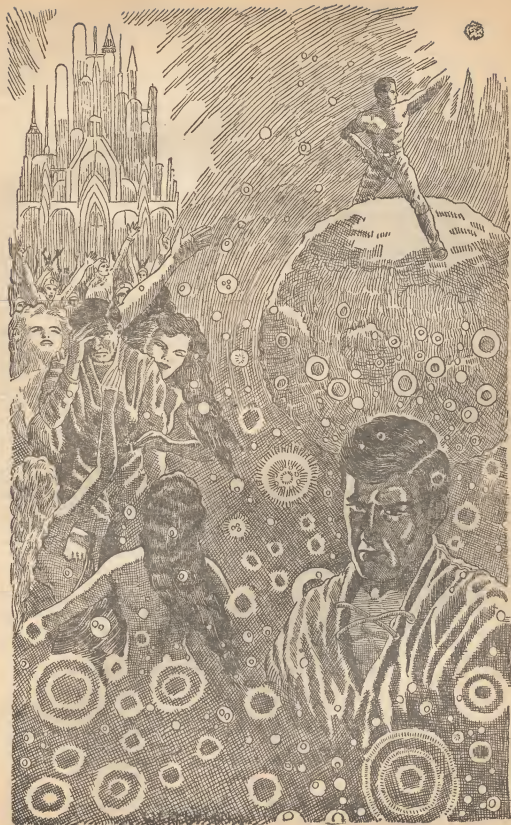
Following the directions I had memorized so carefully, I went straight down the street, turned left, then right. Yes, there it was. A slate-gray building, well out of plumb, with a dingy sign before the doorway: **POWER DIVISION.**

I went in. There were no ushers, no reception clerks, only a faint drone of machinery somewhere below me. A long corridor angled in either direction with marked doors every few feet. The sixth door bore the marking: **COMMISSIONER.**

Even as I looked upon the room's occupant, I knew that this, my initial step, would be a success. The man was a toad of flesh with little pig eyes and albino hair. He put down the glass from which he had been swilling liquor and glared at me. "Complaint department down the hall," he said. "This is a private office."

I crossed to the chair beside his desk and sat down. "I'm George Dulfay," I said quietly, "the new inspector sent by the Council. Will you sign my papers, please?"

He scowled again and peered at me shrewdly through bloodshot eyes, but, after a careless glance at the document I had handed him, he seized a stylus and affixed his signature. Then he raised his eyes to mine.



"New man, eh?" he grinned. "And what do you think of our fair city?"

"It stinks."

My words prompted no reproach from him. He leaned back and made steeples of his hands. "Everything's the same," he said. "Four hundred deaths, four hundred births. One attempted escape resulting in execution. "Flood-water" — he glanced across at the far wall where a panel bore a series of dials — "water 65.0, oxygen zero-zero, paldine 5."

"And the research bureau?" I questioned. So far, I knew I was playing my part to satisfaction.

He snorted. "Failures as usual. You and the Council know as well as I do that there's no cure for the plague."

It was time for the first step, but I didn't hurry it. I got a cheroot out of my pocket, lit it and blew a shaft of smoke toward the mildewed ceiling.

"I'll okay the report as usual," I said. "But there's one thing more. I'll want to buy some of your power. About sixteen thousand *graphlos* . . ."

A wire couldn't have jerked him erect any quicker. "Power!" he repeated. "Sixteen thousand . . ." A gleam entered his blood-shot eyes. "By the Lord Harry! And for what, may I ask?"

I could feel my pulse racing and a hot flush sweep over me, but outwardly I knew I appeared cool.

"If your Research Bureau here believes there is no cure for the plague, the Council has different ideas," I said. "We're going to try an experiment. Sixteen thousand *graphlos* of polarated power at each of the seven cities discharged along a common beam with a step-up transformer between each city. Gargan—he's the new light-ray man in the Council—believes the radiation from such a charge will completely nullify the potency of the plague bacillus."

The Commissioner moved to the edge of his chair. He poured himself a glass of the lavender-colored liquor, drank it and wiped his mouth. "By the Lord Harry," he said, "you're no inspector. Who the hell are you?"

"You have my papers."

He picked them up again and re-read them carefully. I watched him. I could feel something cold move up and down my

spine. And then with a wave of relief I saw the first signs of credulity.

"I believe you mean it," he said. "Tell me, do you really think there's a chance, an escape from this double-damned plague?"

"There's a possibility, but of course it's remote and only in the embryonic stage. Of course you understand all this is confidential. Now — where is your power switchboard?"

He touched a bell, said something into a microphone. Then he got up and extended his hand. "Follow the corridor, Mr. Dulfay. And may Providence go with you."

Outside the office, reaction seized me, and for a moment I swayed there, aware of the terrific strain I had been under. The first barrier was passed. From now on, although there still would be plenty of danger, my actions for the most part would be routine. I threw away my cheroot and headed down the corridor.

That corridor ended in a flight of stairs which I climbed to the second level. Through an archway I passed into the power room proper. Tilted back in a chair in front of the enormous switchboard, a weazened little man nodded to me, signifying that he had had his instructions. I went to work without hesitation, threw over the auxiliary switch, removed the coil of wire from under my tunic and spliced it directly into the main conduit.

Finished, I trailed the coil of wire across the room and tossed it out the open window into the darkness of an alley. I went outside to gather up the loose ends. A low shed there, housing emergency transformers, served my purpose admirably. I got the compact little transmitting set out of my haversack, bracketed it to the wall in a far corner and set the clockwork to functioning.

Exactly one hour later I was back in my tracto-car, driving across the flat.

IF A MONTH AGO anyone had told me I would visit not only Profaldo but each of the seven plague cities of the High Ganymedian Plateau, I would have told them they were crazy. That was before I met Hol-Dai.

Hol-Dai was not his real name, of course; that was what they called him at the mental hospital where I was serving

my interneship. A patriarch of a man, one of the early Earth colonists, he had broken down from excessive research in extra-terrestrial medicine, and he was forever browsing through heavy medical tomes. One day he began talking to me as usual, and for want of something better to do, I listened.

"My son," he said, "you've heard of the seven plague cities: Profaldo, Senar, Caldray, Voltar, Xynan, Malakan, and Klovada?"

I nodded. "Yes, Hol-Dai. Here, take your medicine."

He swallowed the two pills and pointed to a sheet of paper upon which he had been writing. "Did you know they were the richest cities in the System?"

"Rich? No, Hol-Dai, you must be wrong. They have nothing but pestilence."

HE SMILED at that and waggled a finger. "The plague is their protection. my son. Conquer that, and you will come upon the greatest treasure known to mankind. Listen . . ."

Well, I heard him out, patiently at first, then gradually with more and more interest. It was a madman's story in every detail, and yet there was something about it that got me. I knew how the seven cities of the High Ganymedian Plateau were first raided by Conway and his Earth Brigade after enjoying several thousand years' culture on this, the third satellite of Jupiter. How the captured emperor of the seven cities swore a curse of vengeance for the mishandling of his people and in some unknown way introduced the strange and terrible plague which was to turn the seven metropoli into pest-holes avoided and shunned by Earth and Jovian colonists alike.

Then Hol-Dai said something which made me prick up my ears. "Why," he said, "do you think the emperor introduced that plague? For vengeance alone? A ruler's vengeance does not go as far as dooming his people forever. No, my son, for another reason."

I said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

"For three thousand years the seven cities had been living off the plunder of conquered Io and Callisto, the first and second satellites. And never has it oc-

curred to these fools what has become of that plunder."

"They probably will, Hol-Dai," I said. "Some day a fleet of space freighters will carry it all off."

The white-haired old man shook his head. "Not a fleet, my son. A man in the palm of his hand."

I sat down then, and I asked questions, and after a time I had the story in its entirety. Both Io and Callisto had been conquered by the people of Ganymede and had been forced to pay a huge indemnity. Part of that indemnity came in the form of a stone, called by the Ganymedians, the Jupiter Stone. That stone, protected by an envelope of white *pinardium*, contained a compressed particle of the light-active rock which formed Jupiter's great red spot. *And this stone contained sufficient inexhaustible power to move the factories and industrial plants of half the solar system.*

I forgot for a moment that Hol-Dai was listed as psychopathically unbalanced. "Where is this stone?" I demanded.

"It lies in a simple glass case in the old emperor's palace in the city of Klovada," he replied. "But" — he lifted a warning hand—"do not think it is as simple as that. The people of the High Ganymedian Plateau were aware of the value of their treasure and they adopted means to protect it.

"They protected the stone by surrounding it with a small space warp. As it lies there now, it is so heavy an army could not lift it."

"Then . . .?"

"How can it be removed? There is a way, my son, a dangerous, almost impossible way, but one which I have spent my entire life planning. The space warp has been devised to have seven focal points, lying along the plane of the seven cities. I have devised transmitting equipment which will discharge a beam along this plane, thus nullifying the space warp. But, to accomplish this, entrance must be made into each of the seven cities, and that would mean contracting the terrible plague in not one but all seven of its virulent forms.

"I have taken care of that too. I have compounded a pellet which will give temporary immunity to the plague if taken at the proper intervals and . . ."

Here Hol-Dai's mind gave way again,

and he lapsed into unintelligible babbling.

I mulled over this story for a week. During that time I read over Hol-Dai's case history and discovered that his lucid intervals were fairly intermittent and complete. That is, when he was normal, he remained so until he lost his grip entirely. Next I visited the place where he had lived before he was confined to the hospital. My credentials gained me entrance and the right to go through his possessions. Nothing had been touched. I found his vial of immunity pellets with full instructions as to dosage. And I found in his equipment the seven miniature transmitting sets and the necessary connecting wire. In his papers, however, I searched in vain for reference to the Jupiter Stone.

But I didn't stop there. I haunted public libraries and the archives-galleries, always seeking proof for everything Hol-Dai had told me. Where I didn't always find proof, I found "possibility." The old man's story could be true.

As I read over the history of Ganymede, the lure, the fascination of that "stone" swept over me. It became a narcotic, offsetting all other desires until I knew I must act. I took Hol-Dai's equipment and his vial of pellets, and I spent one week studying the geographical layouts of the seven cities. I drove in a tractor-car to the first city of Profaldo, and as you have seen, I successfully "planted" the first transmitting set.

"One down, six to go," I told myself grimly. Full confidence was mine, and my spirits were riding high.

SENAR, the second city, came out of the haze abruptly. High in the sky the immense disc of Jupiter cast a reddish light over the metropolis. As before, all roads leading across the flat converged on a single runway, leading to the main gate.

I entered, and it seemed time had turned backward, erasing the intervening hours. For Senar was the same as Profaldo. The same roaring drink shops and crowd-choked gambling casinos. The same twisting despondent streets sunk in filth and mockery of the law.

Again I came to the building marked **POWER DIVISION**. In the Commissioner's office, however, I was due for a

surprise. A girl turned to me inquiringly.

She was tall, svelte and dark-haired, with agate eyes that bored me through and through. "Well?" she said.

The same story, the same explanation. I proffered my papers, waited a diplomatic length of time, then stated that I wished to purchase some power.

To my astonishment, however, she took the offer matter-of-factly.

"I know," she said. "You are Tepondicon."

"I'm *what*?"

She smiled. "At least you are the mortal counterpart of that legendary figure. According to the Ganymedian legends, a great disaster was to come upon our seven cities and would not be removed until a brave warrior entered each of the cities and fought it alone. The legends call that warrior Tepondicon."

"I see," I said. "And you think . . .?"

"We have the disaster all right in the form of the plague. Now you are here in an attempt to conquer that plague." She waved a careless hand at my consternation. "The Commissioner at Profaldo advised me of your coming. We still do have some communication left, you know."

Tepondicon, eh? It made my role easier. It fitted into my plans nicely. Before I could say more, she was conducting me down the corridor to the power room. She stood by, watching over me, as for a second time I made my necessary connections to the central conduit, and she followed me as I mounted my second transmitting set on a low revetment in the rear of the power building.

As I touched the clockwork into motion she grasped my arm.

"There is no need for you to leave immediately, Mr. Dulfay," she said. "I know very well that you have temporary protection against the plague. Won't you let me show you more of the city of Senar?"

My better judgment said no; my eyes said yes. She stood there smiling, carmine lips a bow of allure, agate eyes gleaming. She was clad in a dress of voltex, and the clinging material revealed every curve and contour of her figure.

An hour later I found myself in a dimly lighted cafe, surrounded by high-caste Ganymedians, Jovians and Earth men

and women, all in various stages of intoxication—all, I knew, seeking to conceal their terror at the relentless death that stalked them.

I sat across a table from the Commissioner of Senar. She was drinking *boca*, and she was laughing gayly.

"Come," she said, "forget your troubles. Remember, you are Tepondicon."

But something was wrong. I could feel it with every fibre of my body. That man looking at me from the opposite table, for one thing. He had been too casual in his quick appraisal of me, too quick to lower his eyes when I glanced his way.

And then abruptly it hit me hard. I was Tepondicon, and as such, my avowed attempt to cure the plague made me a valuable entity, if controlled by the right persons. A group of power-crazed renegades could, by holding me, make any terms they desired for my release.

I looked around carefully, seeking a means of escape; and I saw then other men at other tables, covertly watching me. I drank a full glass of *boca*, pretended to drink another, began to feign drunkenness. Then clumsily I knocked the bottle from the table and staggered to my feet.

"Gotta get more," I hiccupped. "'S'cuse me, please."

Stumbling unsteadily, I weaved my way toward the bar. Halfway across to it, I swiveled and broke into a run. Instantly a shout of warning rose up behind me. Through the maze of tables I raced, overturning three of them with a crash as I passed.

I gained the door. A heat-gun charge slammed into the wall, inches above my head. Feet pounded in pursuit. Then I was outside, leaping up the steps to the main level, sprinting down the back street.

I ran until a stitch in my side drew me up. Behind me roared the night life of the city, but there was no sign of pursuit. I passed through the main gate without trouble and half an hour later was driving leisurely across the flat.

PROFALDO AND SENAR were behind me. What conditions would I meet in the next city, Caldray? My wildest dreams did not prepare me for the reception that was to be mine. Scarcely had I entered Caldray when I stopped short,

staring at the scene ahead. The streets were jammed with citizenry. In blazing ato-bulbs high overhead was the single word TEPONDICON. Flags and pennants hung from every balcony.

Even as I moved uncertainly forward, two stalwart men, clad in the ancient chain mail of Ganymede's earlier years, strode forward. Back somewhere in the tiers of rectangular buildings the amplified strains of an orchestra rose up. It was a recording, I knew, but it was Bokart's *Symphony Out of Space*, in all its pomp and glory.

A deafening cheer rose up then. I was conducted to a low carriage, and with two scarlet-clad postilions on either side began my tour of the city.

"Tepondicon! Tepondicon!" yelled the crowd.

Well, it was confusing, and disconcerting, too. With all eyes focused upon me, my every movement would be watched. A wrong word, a misstep, and those cheers would change to death yells. And yet as the carriage bore me smoothly along the paved streets, the significance of it all became clear in my mind in every detail.

These people were rats, scum of the System. What matter if their hopes were falsely raised to the heights? They were doomed anyway by the plague. And in four days more the Jupiter Stone would be mine. Up until now, my life had been one great series of failures. At the Martian School of Technology I had been expelled in my sophomore year for a mere matter of selling drugs to my fellow students. I had been cashiered from the Royal Space Force for what the upstart officers called insubordination. Gamblings, swindlings, I had tried them all with little luck. This would be my metamorphosis, my emergence from the cocoon of mediocrity into success.

The procession drew up before the Power Division building. The Power Commissioner, a tall gangly man this time, waited to receive me at the top of the steps.

But inside his office, with the roar and hubbub of the streets cut off, the interview was much the same as the two previous. He passed a box of cheroots across the desk, leaned back and smoked contentedly.

"And to think," he said, "that a week ago I was ready to join the list of suicides.

Mr. Dulfay, I wonder if you realize what this means to the people. Freedom from the plague. It seems incredible."

"You must remember," I cautioned, "It's only an experiment as yet. I can promise nothing."

He waved this aside. "You will be successful," he said. "The hopes of thousands cannot be denied. And now the power. All we have is at your disposal."

VOLTAR! XYNAN! MALAKAN!
In the fourth, fifth and sixth cities everything worked like clockwork. My welcome in each succeeding metropolis was greater than the last. Crowds screamed "*Tepondicon!*" to the echo. The cities must have ransacked every corner of their confines to festoon their battlements and parapets with tinsel. Hope was hysteria. The black spectre of the plague was pushed to the background. As the legendary hero, *Tepondicon*, I was the embodiment of all their dreams and hopes.

Before entering each city I swallowed three of *Hol-Dai's* pellets. Before leaving, I tapped the power centers and put transmitting sets in operation.

And now *Klovada*, the seventh and final city. In a few hours my beam would be discharged along the planes of the seven cities. The space warp would be nullified. Remained then only to go to the royal palace, open the glass case and remove the *Jupiter Stone*. With that stone my life would begin anew. No more swindlings or petty thieveries. I would be king in my own right.

I did not realize the strain under which I had been living until the official reception in *Klovada* was over and I was ushered into the Commissioner's office. There I slumped wearily into a chair and waited impatiently for him to enter.

The Commissioner was a girl. Not a girl like the seductress of *Senar*, but a small dainty child with golden hair and blue eyes. She strode forward briskly, a pleasant smile on her lips, and extended her hand.

"I bid you welcome, Sir *Tepondicon*," she said. "You have reached the end of your goal."

There was something in her tone of voice that made me look at her sharply. Could it be possible that she suspected . . . ?

"You have come a long way," she said,

speaking slowly. "You have braved many dangers, and you have conducted yourself in a most ethical manner. May I ask, Mr. Dulfay, what your personal profit will be in this venture?"

"No profit," I said easily. "A scientist has only research as his aim. That and the welfare of the people."

She nodded. "Still, it is unusual for a man to risk so much."

"About the matter of power," I broke in. "As you know, I'll need sixteen thousand *graphlos* and . . ."

She seemed not to hear. A distant look entered her blue eyes. "Tell me, Mr. Dulfay, have you ever heard of an artifact kept here in *Klovada* known as the *Jupiter Stone*?"

I went slowly rigid. The girl breathed deeply and continued. "Some time ago a great scientist communicated with me as overchief of power-control of the seven cities and outlined a plan similar to the one in which you are now engaged. He was a great man, but under stress of excessive work, his mind broke. He was taken to a mental hospital, where I am told he is now known by the simple name of *Hol-Dai*.

"Before his illness *Hol-Dai* worked out a method to overcome the plague. It was simple. A person would visit each of the seven cities. He would have temporary protection against the plague, but of course he would become a carrier for the germs. When he finally reached *Klovada*, the final city, he would be a walking vial of the bacillus in all its seven forms.

"Now the *Jupiter Stone*, of which I spoke before. It is a great thing, capable of generating untold amounts of power, if properly harnessed. So far, however, the scientists have been unable to move it because it lies protected by a small but peculiar form of space warp. But the stone has other potentialities. This man, *Hol-Dai*, discovered that it will transform the plague bacillus from a positive form to a negative form.

"In other words if this hypothetical visitor of the seven cities were, at the end of his journey, to expose himself to the radiations of the *Jupiter Stone*, a curious event would take place. He would become a carrier for bacilli which, when released, would immediately begin to combat the plague.

Practically an anti-toxin, you see. Again, continuing our hypothetical case, if this man were to retrace his steps, again visiting each of the seven cities, it is estimated this action would result in the complete end of the plague within a period of months."

"I see," I said. Far back in a corner of my mind a doubt was beginning to grow. "Why hasn't this been done before?"

She smiled. "Because until you came no one knew how to acquire temporary protection against the disease and no one had the courage to expose himself to it without that protection. Now I am aware that you have found that protection. But as you must know, if you let yourself be struck by the radiations of the Jupiter Stone, you would die within six weeks!"

"You mean . . . ?"

"I mean that if you go through with your role as Tepondicon you will never live to know your glory."

SHE TAPPED her pencil on the desk. "I might add that Hol-Dai also told us of a plan to nullify the space warp surrounding the Jupiter Stone. Since his sickness, however, that plan has remained a mystery."

I breathed easier. So Hol-Dai had not tricked me. But this girl with all her babbling of curing the plague must be an utter fool. What did I care about cure? It was the stone I wanted!

She looked across at me. "I don't know who or what you are, Mr. Dulfay, but please listen to me a moment. Once these seven cities were the pride of the Jovian System. Their people were lighthearted, gay and strong. True, in their earlier years they exploited their neighbors on Io and Callisto, but that was long ago. For generations they were engaged in peaceful pursuits—trade, industry, commerce.

"Look at them now. Pest holes where vice and sin run rampant, where hope has vanished, where there is no tomorrow, but only today! Conceive, if you can, the utter curse of that plague. To know with absolute finality that you are impregnated with it and that only death awaits you. And then consider this legend of Tepondicon. Not a mighty warrior, not a knight clad in armor, but a simple man sacrificing his

own life for the lives of other men. It is the ultimate glory."

She rose to her feet. "Mr. Dulfay, I leave you now. But I call your attention to the two doors leading from this office. The one by which you came is the exit. It leads to the street, and from the street one can make his way to the palace and so on to the Jupiter Stone. The stone is unguarded. If the space warp were done away with, it could be taken easily.

"The other door leads to the radiation chamber, the room which was devised by Hol-Dai. There, by means of special equipment, the radiations from the Jupiter Stone are transmitted to a screen. If you enter this room and sit before the screen, within a period of twenty minutes the plague germs your body is now carrying will be negated. You can then make your return visits to the six other cities. The plague will be conquered, but you will die."

She moved across to the exit. "It is for you to decide," she said. "All I can say is that one way leads to the ultimate glory."

She went out and I stood there in a daze. For five minutes I didn't move. Glory, she had said. Yes, there would be glory, something which had played no part heretofore in my life. But likewise there would be death. The same death which awaited the doomed citizenry of the seven doomed cities. On the other hand was the Jupiter Stone, embodying all I had fought for.

I walked across to the desk and sat down in the chair before it. I must put my thoughts and actions of the past days on paper. I must record everything. If I chose the plague door, it would be my last testament—and a monument. If I took the street door, set up my transmitting set—and finally gained the Jupiter Stone, it would be a condemnation—a curse—to dog me the rest of my days. Honor versus dishonor, balanced against life versus death.

It is this document you are now reading!

At the end of an hour I stood up and neatly folded the paper. The air was hot, stifling. Somewhere a mercury clock pulsed rhythmically. Then, with a little laugh, I strode across the room toward one of the doors.

Of course, you all know which door I opened.



SPACE BAT

By CARL SELWYN



Flint threw his weight on the control lever.

Out of the caves of space it flew—huge, rapacious, terrifying. But Lou Flint met its vicious challenge happily. For, like the girl at his side, it was worth one million dollars!

THE JUNGLE was filled with the shouts of the hunters and the sounds of their heavy boots crashing through the dry sword grass. The long line of men were running shoulder to shoulder, stooping under the red vines, stumbling over the mossy rocks.

Bounding ahead in panic surged hundreds of animals of a strange species. Shaped like deer, they had no antlers and their delicate bodies were covered with rich greenish-gold feathers. Eyes large with terror, feathers ruffled, they stampeded through the entrance of a corral that was so well camouflaged it was almost invisible in the tangled plants and tree trunks.

In a corner of the corral, shadowed from the late afternoon sun, a tall, bare-chested young man waited motionless as an iron-wood tree, watching the animals stream toward him. His only clothing was a pair of faded khaki shorts and soft leather boots. Strapped to his waist was a leather holster containing a heavy pistol, its thick barrel shaped like a flashlight. His ruggedly handsome face was angry, his gray eyes cold as he watched the animals futilely leaping at the surrounding fence.

Suddenly the hunters broke through the screening jungle. Their leader bellowed, "Okay! Bash their heads in! Let's get their hides off!"

The other men advanced toward the herd of frenzied animals, clubs raised. The leader swung his own stick down toward one of the creatures that tried to race past him.

Instantly the ironwood tree came to life. His hand was one blurred motion as it jerked his odd-shaped pistol from its holster, squeezed the trigger. A silver streak flashed from the barrel, struck the man's arm before the club could fall. His arm froze in mid-swing.

"Drop those sticks and get off this planetoid!" As the bare-chested one came out of the shadows, his voice had virtually the force of his weapon.

The men stood with clubs half-raised, staring at him. "It's Lou Flint," one of them whispered.

"Watch him! That's an ice-ray pistol!" They lowered their clubs slowly, glancing toward their leader.

The big fellow rubbed his rigid right arm with his other hand. It stuck out before him at a grotesque angle; he couldn't move it yet. As he looked at Flint his eyes were deadly. "Don't stick your nose in this business, trapper." His thick lips curled. "You don't own this land."

"I'm sticking my nose into any business that kills off a thousand feather-deer in two weeks," Lou Flint said. "I've seen enough of your butchering."

The big man's stiffened arm suddenly dropped back to his side, perfectly normal again. An ice-ray's harmless effect lasted only a minute—but while it lasted it was a potent weapon. "You're a big talker with that gun in your hand."

In answer, Flint dropped the pistol at his feet. The other glanced at his men, saw them waiting for his next move. He strode forward. Flint waited solidly before him, fists on his hips. "You aren't leaving?" "Nope." Then quick as a snake the fellow bent, tried to scoop up the pistol. Flint was quicker. His fist plowed into the man's chin. The blow lifted him up on his toes, sent him stumbling backward till he crumpled silently to the ground. "Anybody else got any arguments?" Flint asked, looking toward the others. Nobody had. "Then get off this planetoid. If I catch you here again I'm going to send *your* hides back to your filthy fur boss."

←Planet—Winter

Two of the men came over with tight lips and picked up their unconscious comrade. Straining under his weight, they rejoined the others who were moving back toward the trampled jungle, muttering silently.

Flint picked up his pistol, dropped it in his holster. He strode over to the side of the corral and kicked a hole in the fence to let out the feather-deer. Then, with a glance at the low-lying sun, he set out down a dim trail, walking fast.

Despite his threat, he knew he hadn't seen the last of this business.

FROM THE WILD REGION Flint called home, through the maze of Ring planets to the Saturn mainland, was only an hour's jump—if you knew the way. If you didn't, well, even the Stellar Patrol got lost looking for you.

The Ring was uncharted, an inestimable jumble of satellites ranging in size from sand-like grains to full-blown worlds supporting their own plant and animal life. Their only ties to the mother planet were the cosmic forces that kept them constantly revolving around her and their common atmosphere, so deep it enveloped both Saturn and the Ring.

Flint knew every shape, every color, every landmark in the place, and his plane weaved through the maze at a speed that would have ended in a crash with a less experienced hand at the controls.

The hazy twilight was just settling over Saturn when he plunged down into its capital city. Pausing at the space-port only long enough to wiggle into a shirt, he caught the shuttle chute across town and arrived at the capitol just as the government workers were leaving the building. He ran up the gleaming stairs, turned down the glowing corridor and hurried through the silver door on which impressive letters read: GOVERNOR'S OFFICE.

A secretary looked up from her desk with startled eyes. Her expression changed from surprise to alarm as Flint strode past her toward a closed door at the end of the room.

"Here! Do you have an appointment—"

But Flint had shoved open the door and stepped into the Governor's private office.

A tall, white-haired man looked up

from a huge desk. He rose quickly, smiling, and held out his hand. "I've been wanting to see you, Lou. No one knew how to find you in the Ring."

Flint shook his hand, pulled up a chair, and started right in. "This tract of planetoids of mine out in the Ring—do I own them—legally—or don't I?"

The Governor looked down at his hands, inspected his fingernails. "That's what I wanted to see you about, Lou." When he met Flint's eyes it was with a look that said he was about to face an unpleasant task. "Your father spent half his life hunting space bat out there—he claimed several planetoids, I believe."

"Twenty-two of them," Flint stated.

"And I know that after your father died," the Governor continued, "you took over and have been hunting bat yourself ever since—a mighty long wild-geese chase I call it, but that's your business. Anyway, your father was one of the pioneers here, Lou. I'll always—"

"Governor, if you've got bad news, spill it."

"All right, I'll give it to you straight. You don't have any legal claim to those planetoids. The Saturnian Government has never recognized squatters' rights out there and I'm afraid there's no time to fight it out with Congress now." He hesitated. "Your land is being sold to an Earth fur corporation for a million dollars."

Flint sat there staring at the Governor for a long moment. Then abruptly he got to his feet. "They're the guys I've been running into ever since feather-deer became the fur coat rage on Earth." He spoke through his teeth. "I've seen their work—thousands of raw, skinned carcasses strewn about the woods—vultures everywhere. They're butchers! In two months there won't be a feather-deer left in the Ring. They'll be extinct. Do you think I'm going to stand by and watch that happen?"

He leaned over the desk, resting on his big fists. "I'm a hunter, but I hunt animals that can fight back—tigodons, baragators, swamp wolves—not these helpless little things you can run down and kill with a club."

The Governor shook his white head sadly. "I'm truly sorry, Lou. I wish there were something I could do but the owner of this fur outfit is coming in on tonight's

space liner. He wants to go out to the Ring just as soon as he arrives. I've been asked to find a guide."

"One million dollars," Flint thought aloud. "It's entirely a matter of money."

"I'm afraid it is. If you could only get a space bat *now*, Lou—doesn't that Earth circus still offer a million to anybody who captures one alive?"

"Yeah," Flint said dejectedly. "But nobody's ever captured a space bat, dead or alive." He stuck his hands deep in his pockets and walked around the room, staring at the floor. Suddenly he halted in his tracks. Then he whirled back to the desk. "If I get a million dollars to you before this guy gives you his check, is the place mine?"

The Governor's smile was puzzled. "Well, I could probably arrange it, but—"

"Fine. Now could you also arrange for me to meet this guy at the space port tonight? I'll be his guide."

"I don't like the way you're acting, Lou. I don't want any trouble."

Flint grinned. "You old goat. You're thinking about your reputation. When you and Dad were with the first settlers that took Saturn away from the natives, you didn't worry about trouble then. But I promise—I won't do anything to hurt your politics."

The Governor shook his head resignedly. "You're just as stubborn as your father was," he said. He reached in a drawer and handed Flint a small engraved card. It read:

K. V. Vaun

Fur Fashions, Inc.

New York City, Earth

"Thanks," Flint said. "I'll be there tonight." He strode quickly from the room.

TEN MINUTES LATER the great shadowy sphere that was the Saturn mainland was shrinking in the distance. Ahead, through the plane's front view-plate, the Ring arced across the heavens, a pastel rainbow against the outer night. Night here was never complete blackness; the Ring's sprinkling of radium moons gave a glow one could read by even at midnight.

Ten minutes more and he abruptly threw the ship into a shuddering bank,

skirted a looming planetoid, dived to a precarious landing on its neighbor. He dragged a spare radio set from under his seat and with it in his hand jumped out of the ship and ran to a large tree on which one end of a heavy cable was tied.

The other end of the cable stretched up and away from the planetoid and out across the misty void—to the neighboring globe which was so heavily jungled that there was no place to land a plane. Flint climbed into the dangling cable chair, holding the radio in his lap, and pushed himself out across the wire, away from the planetoid, over the sheer drop ten miles under his feet.

Seconds later—things happened fast with this feather gravity—the other world moved up under him and he dropped lightly to its surface.

The trail he took through the woods was more like a tunnel, and the little clearing that soon appeared was like a well, the moon lights filtering through.

IN THE CLEARING lay the rusted hull of a space ship, used for a house. Before it stood a Venusian, skinning a baragator which hung by its scaly legs from a log tripod. The man's only clothing was a bright red loin cloth, and the flesh of his limbs, chest, and face was green, a burnished green like the sheen of sunlight under water. He was not large, but the smooth suppleness of his body gave an impression of great strength, like the coils of a python.

As Flint came out of the jungle, the Venusian turned to face him as though he knew of his approach, although Flint's tread had been silent as a cat's. His words, before Flint could speak, were also uncanny—as if he already knew what Flint had come to tell him.

"No like trouble with white policemen," he said, "but your plan seems only way to save hunting ground from seekers of feathers. I will help—you, my friend of many seasons."

He spoke without moving his lips—because he wasn't using his lips. His voice was toneless, mechanical. It came from a small microphone attached to his throat. The impulse for the microphone came from the pulsations of his bloodstream which he could control. Venusians were a strange

race—being deaf and dumb and having the power to read brain waves were only a few of their peculiarities.

Flint grinned. "I don't know why I take the trouble to come all the way down the path, Greene. You could pick up my thoughts from the cable just as well." Then, in a hurry to get on with his business, "Is there anything you didn't understand?"

"One thing not clear—something you must have planned before coming into range," the toneless voice said. "You wish me to meet your plane on way to Ring, kidnap man from you and bring him here," he ran through the plan he'd picked up from Flint's mind. "Then I radio message about ransom—a million dollars. But how will money be delivered?"

"Simple," Flint explained. "The guy's fur company sends the money to the Saturn Express Agency. We tell them to put it in a small rocket and shoot it toward the Ring. We'll make them put a radio-signaling gadget into the rocket, too. All we'll have to do is follow the signal and pick up the rocket before we let the guy go." The plan was foolproof; there was no way the police could prove anything on anybody.

"No," Greeno agreed with his thoughts, "their evidence against you purely circumstantial. Me, they never guess."

"That's it," Flint strode toward the space ship hull with the radio set. "Where you want this? Have your finger on it at eight tonight and I'll radio the guy's description." Although Greeno couldn't hear, he could pick up radio vibrations by touch.

Greeno followed him into the cylinder, motioned toward a table in the corner. The place was battery-lighted, soft-walled with hides.

"I'll have to put up a little fight when you leave my plane," Flint said. "Make it look better—"

But Greeno held up his hand, motioned him on out the door. "Can't pick up thoughts inside," he reminded him.

Flint went out grinning; he could never get used to the fact that the Venusian was reading his mind, not hearing his words, and that he couldn't pick up the waves when he was surrounded by metal such as the ship's hull. Outside, he started to tell him again about having to put on the fight act.

But Greeno stopped him. "Understand now," he said.

Flint laughed. Even a spoken "Good luck" wasn't necessary. He turned, went back down the trail thinking it was a good thing the Stellar Patrol hadn't been able to get Venusians to work for them.

"Very good thing," Greeno called after him.

NEARING SATURN, Flint's eye was pressed against the filterscope in his view-plate, scanning the black well of space to the east. Then he saw the liner, far out, a silver bullet glinting in the rays of the sun that had sunken below Saturn's horizon hours ago.

He was standing at the gate when the great ship came in, roared up the quartz strip, and halted at the ramp. Flint stopped the purser. "I'm supposed to meet a fellow named K. V. Vaun, fur merchant. Which one is he?"

The purser slid a finger down his passenger list, shook his head. "No gentleman by that name." Then his finger paused. "There was a lady—"

"A lady?"

The purser looked toward the ship. "Yes. A Miss K. V. Vaun—there she is now." He hurried away, leaving Flint staring at the girl coming down the ramp.

She wore a luxurious greenish-gold coat but the rest of her was strictly business. She was almost as tall as Flint, carried a brief case, and wore glasses. Her face had the pallor of an office fluorescent lamp, her lips were without makeup and her hair was done up in a grim knot at the back of her neck. Her stride had the purposeful determination of one who always knew just where she was going, just what she was going to do.

Following her, like lieutenants behind a general, trotted two small men, each carrying a briefcase, each fairly exuding efficiency.

Flint stared at the three as they came toward him, stared at them as they marched past him, stared at their backs as they assailed the baggage room. Well, there went his plans—he had to give up without even a fight. He couldn't kidnap a woman.

Then suddenly his big fists knotted at his sides. Staring at Miss Vaun's back,

he realized her coat was feather-deer. Flint stuck a resolute shoulder into the crowd and went after her.

They were waiting at the baggage counter when he came up. Miss Vaun looked over the crowd, tapping her foot. "Now where is the yokel that was to meet us?"

"Miss Vaun?"

She took a step backward as Flint loomed before her.

"Yes?"

"I'm the yokel."

"Oh," she said. Then, without apology, "Excellent. You're Mr. Flint—the Governor radioed us to expect you. We can leave immediately."

"You don't want to rest a bit first, Karen?" one of her little men asked. Flint shouted to himself, "No!" From what he'd seen and heard he was ready to go through the whole thing now, and Greeno was waiting at the radio for the word go.

But Miss Vaun apparently had the energy of a cash register. "These liners are virtually traveling hotels, John," she said. "I'm quite rested and I want to look over this property so I can close the deal in the morning." She turned to Flint. "Shall we go?"

Flint led them silently toward his plane, grinning inwardly at the deal that by morning certainly should be well closed.

LOUNGING over the controls, Flint could see his guests behind him in the mirror. Rudely enough, he hadn't been introduced to the men but from their conversation he had determined that Mr. John Leggett—short, black-mustached, slick-haired—was Miss Vaun's legal advisor. Mr. Simon Hudson—short, bald, bug-eyed—was a fur expert.

The three faced each other around the two jump seats pulled down from the sides of the cabin. While they talked, Flint had whispered into his radio, "It's a woman, Greeno, not a man."

Through the plane's plexiglass nose and ceiling, the Ring sparkled in all its glory, like a bridge of jewels across the heavens. But its wonders were wasted on Karen Vaun. "I had no idea it was this far out," she said. Her pale face was bored.

"Increased shipping costs," the lawyer said.

"The heat, too," the fur expert added,

mopping his bald head. "Have to watch out for deterioration."

Flint ground his teeth, looked at the clock. Thank Saturn he hadn't long to listen to this—Greeno should show up in a few minutes. But those few minutes were long and before two more of them had elapsed he found himself getting madder and madder.

"To make up for shipping rates and deterioration," the lawyer said, toying with his mustache, "we'll have to increase supply." He thumbed through a sheaf of papers in his lap. "At fifty-six ninety per hide—"

"One crew of hunters can take five hundred hides a day," Hudson interrupted him. "Think what a hundred crews could do."

"I wonder how many feather-deer there are out here," Miss Vaun said. And though Flint bit his lip, it finally slipped out.

"Did it ever occur to you," he said over his shoulder, "that the fur business is a murderous racket?"

THE WOMAN stiffened visibly. Indignation flushed her face. Her stooges sat up like startled rabbits.

"I beg your pardon!"

"The fur business," Flint repeated, eyes on their faces in the mirror. "You're a bunch of butchers. I guess you've never seen a feather-doe standing over the raw carcass of her freshly-skinned faun." He turned in the seat to face them, talking through his teeth. "I've seen a whole planet littered with dead animals—thousands' of them—stinking in the sun."

"Mr. Flint!" the woman's voice was like a razor. "Obviously you don't know how to converse with a lady. You will please return to your piloting."

This scalded Flint. "Why, you walking adding machine! You flat-chested treasurer's report! You haven't an ounce of womanly warmth in you. A lady! If you're a lady, I'm a moon-baboon's uncle. All you know is fur prices. If you—"

Suddenly his audience was no longer looking at him. Like a quick change of masks, the faces of all three of them had changed from anger to the stark twitching white of sheer terror. Every eye was staring past him, over his shoulder at the view-plate.

Instinctively, Flint ducked, whirled around.

As he turned, the woman screamed. Her scream filled the cabin and with this sound in his ears, Flint saw the *thing* and ice shot through his whole body.

Outside the ship, through the glass, not three feet away, two eyes as big as his head were gazing down into the lighted cabin. Red-pupiled, glowing like neon, they rolled slowly in their great sockets and came to focus directly upon him.

Flint didn't move. He couldn't. Around the eyes was a six-foot mass of black hair. Between them, two gaping holes in a black rubber-like mound was a nose. Above this lay the furrowed folds of a mouth with teeth like elephant tusks. The hairy face was upsidedown; the thing was above the ship, peering in at its occupants.

Slowly, as Flint stared at the face, gray droplets like fog formed on the glass and obscured the thing. For a second, it was gone from sight. Then, as quickly as it had disappeared, the fog melted in the wind outside and the face began to reappear. The thing was breathing; the fog was the moisture of its breath. But in that second of obliteration—an eternity it seemed, though the woman's scream still echoed in Flint's ears—one thought seared itself on his numb brain.

Space bat.

The plane bucked, plunged straight down, away from the bat. But the bat, like its much smaller brothers, was not to be eluded on the wing. Like a black cloud with its hundred-foot wingspread, it fell off on one wing, dived after them.

It was upon the plane again with two sweeps of its mighty wings. Its teeth clashed like a rock crusher—Flint heard it through the ship's two-foot thick walls—and as it missed, it overshot the plane, swept past them. Instantly it whirled around, hurtled back.

"Radio for help!" The lawyer's voice was shrill. He sat there wringing his hands. Sweat glistened on the fur expert's bald head. The woman clutched the arms of her seat, eyes huge. Then the bat was on them again.

Flint did the only thing possible. He dived again. But that was a mistake. The bat had learned that trick. It also dived. At the same instant.

The bony claw on one wing caught the plane a glancing blow midway its length, sent it spinning end over end. And, when Flint's darting hands leveled it off again, it cut around in a wild circle, out of control. The bulge on the port wall of the cabin said the port fuel pump was smashed.

And the bat circled to come at them again.

Flint's passengers realized their peril. The two men jumped up, panic on their faces. But as Flint throttled the port jet frantically, futilely, Karen Vaun was on her feet behind him crying in a voice that was shaky but nonetheless sensible, "Where's the hand pump?" Miss Vaun was scared stiff but wasn't one to give up in a corner.

The bat came in from the side. Flint threw in his reverse rockets. The plane stopped as if it had rammed a planetoid, hurling the three behind him to the floor. The bat zoomed past them.

"The pump's under the floor!" Flint yelled over his shoulder. "Pull up that trap door." He gave the plane every ounce of juice its starboard jets would take, trying to gain what lead he could before the bat came back. In the mirror he saw the woman on her knees, pulling at the trap door, then jerking the manual pump lever.

And it worked! The port tube sputtered, then streamed smooth, a weak jet but enough to give a push from the left. And on the left, seconds away, Flint saw a medium-sized planetoid. The chase had taken them almost to the Ring.

The bat came down on his tail like another plane attacking. Flint dove straight at the planetoid. Behind him, Karen Vaun worked the pump madly, Hudson and Leggett stood by helplessly, staring up at the hairy face that grew larger every second above them.

Flint held his power dive till the last possible second. The planetoid changed from a globe to a flat surface. Trees separated from the green mass of jungle. Each leaf sprang up separate and distinct. Close behind the plane, the bat's mouth gaped open. Flint jammed his rise rockets in.

The trees came up with a sickening wobble, slanted back and down, then away. The plane brushed the branches as it zoomed skyward. Behind the plane, the bat twisted against its tremendous momen-

tum, cut a wide swath through the tree tops. When it flapped up laboriously, circling, searching for them again, the plane was well beyond sight of its weak eyes.

Watching through the glass, Flint saw it circle higher, finally sail away toward the Ring. And as his fingers relaxed on the controls, he found himself laughing.

He headed the plane back toward the spot where the bat had interrupted their course. "Somebody keep pumping that jet," he said. "I was supposed to meet a fellow in another ship on the way out. He'll take you back to Saturn. I'm going after that bat."

KAREN VAUN prevailed on her men to take over the pump. She came and stood behind Flint, holding tightly to the back of his chair. Her lips opened but it was a moment before any words came out. Finally, "You're going *after* that thing!"

"Lady," Flint said, "if you knew how long I've been hunting one of those critters, you'd know how quick I want to get rid of you and get on its tail." He looked back at her, grinned. He had too much to do to be angry now. Get back, get his big guns in the plane, then find that bat. You couldn't miss something that size. Shoot him up a little. Not much—wing him. That circus wanted him alive. One million bucks!

The kidnapping, of course, was all off now. He felt almost friendly toward the woman. "You were a mighty big help on that pump, Miss Vaun," he said. "You're braver than I thought." It was the first kind word—or thought—he'd managed about her since they'd met.

"What—*was* it?"

"Space bat. It's a kind of giant bat. Nobody knows where they come from—somewhere out in space. One comes in every year or so. It feeds on what wild life it can find, then sails back out into the darkness. They kill off almost as many animals as your fur hunters—" And this last, he regretted as soon as he'd said it. The woman's eyes misted, strangely enough; her lower lip trembled. And Flint frowned, suddenly amazed, as he looked at her.

Karen Vaun looked like an entirely different person. The office pallor was gone from her face; it was rouged with excitement. Her prim knot of hair had lost its pins and tumbled to her shoulders. Her

whole body as she stood there, still breathing heavily, had taken on a slim vibrance that belied the memory of her former rigid dignity.

The real miracle was her eyes—her glasses lay broken on the floor. Her eyes were soft blue, bright as a spring morning now.

Flint shook his head in astonishment. "When you get back," he said, "take a look in a mirror and think things over. You've been wasting your time behind a desk." He turned back to the controls, and as he turned Greeno's plane appeared ahead and pulled up alongside.

"Well, here's where you get a new pilot." He'd take Greeno's plane. Greeno could limp back in this one and rent another one to follow him up. Flint was so sure of his bat money he wasn't worrying about the cost of anything any more.

He idled while Greeno's ship, skillfully, without a bump, hooked into the little clamps on the hull outside. A bell clanged—signal to unlock the port—and he got up, reached for the wheel on the safety door.

But Karen—it was odd that he didn't seem to think of her as Miss Vaun any more—reached out and stopped his hand on the wheel. "Mr. Flint," she said softly, "take me with you—to hunt the bat."

Flint stared at her, not believing her words. Hudson took her arm. "Now, Karen. You've had a very trying experience. You should—"

She jerked away from him. "Please let me go, Mr. Flint. This means more to me than you know. I haven't forgotten what you said about my not being a real woman. You're right. I've been nothing but a walking adding machine and I—"

"Look," Flint tried to put a stop to it, "if you'd let yourself go you'd be a pretty decent human being, mighty pretty without your glasses." He spun the wheel out of her grasp. "But I've got work to do now."

"Please!" she cried. "If—" But she never finished that; she stepped back from the door quickly as the man in the space suit came in from the other ship—Greeno, taking no chances on future identification. Wrinkled like a prune, the uninflated suit covered his body completely; only his eyes were visible through their glass slit.

"It's all off, Greeno," Flint said. "We

ran across a bat on the way out! It's headed toward the Ring. Take these people back to Saturn and—" But the man in the space suit had whipped out his hand, caught Karen Vaun by the wrist.

It was only then that Flint remembered Greeno couldn't hear him, not only couldn't hear him because he was deaf but couldn't read his thoughts because he was surrounded by the metal hull of the ship. He stepped over and grabbed him by the shoulder, pointed to the girl, shook his head violently. "Cut it out! Skip it! It's all off!" he mouthed, hoping Greeno might read his lips.

"Who is it?" Hudson and Leggett looked on nervously. "What's he trying to do?"

Flint started to explain, but then how could he explain that he'd planned to kidnap Karen Vaun and changed his mind. He continued his sign language at Greeno.

Karen struggled, trying to free herself. "I don't understand! Stop him!"

Finally, Flint threw an arm around Greeno's neck. There was nothing else to do. Hudson grabbed Greeno's arm, tried to pry loose his grasp on the girl.

The wiry Venusian twisted out of Flint's arm before he could get a head-lock grip. Coming up with his other hand, he threw an uppercut at Hudson. The lawyer saw it coming, jerked his head back like a turtle. But Flint didn't see it coming.

The full force of Greeno's swing caught him exactly on the point of his chin.

The room spun wildly. Then it dissolved into blackness.

WHEN Flint came to, he was lying on the floor. Hudson stood over him. He had acquired Flint's ice pistol, seemed prepared to use it at any moment.

As Flint sat up and looked around, Leggett said, "Just a moment and I'll let you in," and got up from the controls where he'd been talking into the radio. He went over to the door, twirled the wheel and Flint realized what he'd thought was his own head ringing was the safety bell. Through the glass he saw a slim light cruiser lying alongside where Greeno's ship had been. On its gleaming hull were the letters S P—the Stellar Patrol.

What were they doing here? Flint grabbed one of the seats, pulled himself up.

"Stay where you are!" Hudson wagged the ice gun threateningly. Then the door opened and three red-uniformed patrolmen crowded into the cabin, jet pistols leveled, eyes searching the room quickly.

"This him?" One of the patrolmen, blue-chinned and beefy, sized Flint up.

"I took his gun," Hudson said. He handed the ice pistol to the nearest patrolman as if he was glad to get rid of its responsibility. The group stood around Flint as if he were an animal they'd caught.

"The boys are on the way out to the Ring," the big patrolman said. "There's several billion planetoids out there, though—like looking for a needle in a haystack, isn't it, Flint?"

Flint was getting his thinking up to date now. He must have been out half an hour or so. Hudson and Leggett must have radioed the Patrol, told them the story. Of course they suspected him, the way he'd talked to Greeno. And now he was accused of something he'd tried his best to stop. Poetic justice had caught him red-handed.

"You were the bright boy who dreamed up the whole thing, weren't you, Flint?" the patrolman continued. "Headquarters works fast. We got a report on you on the way out here. We know you had reasons for wanting to get rid of Miss Vaun. We know all about your little talk with the Governor this evening; his secretary heard the whole thing."

"I'm sure he knew the man in the space suit," Leggett said. "He told us he was going to meet a man here and when he came in he called him 'Greeno.'"

And by now, Flint thought, Greeno had taken the girl back to his planetoid, following the plan exactly without the faintest idea it had misfired. If Greeno could only pick up thoughts at this distance! Flint cursed silently. Well, there were two things to be done and done fast. Get word to Greeno, somehow; tell him to get the girl back to Saturn. And get after that bat. He couldn't let this mess throw a hitch into something he'd been trying to do all these years.

The easiest way to straighten Greeno out was by radio; good thing he'd taken that set out to him. "Now, listen," he said, "I haven't got time to go into a lot of ex-

planations. A space bat's showed up in the Ring; it's worth a lot of money to me. Let me get to the radio and I'll have Miss Vaun safely back on Saturn in an hour. It's all a mistake. When I get through bat hunting I'll clear up the whole business."

The big patrolman laughed. "He'll be glad to help us out when he gets time; that's a good one." Then he stopped laughing, took a step toward Flint. "You're going to tell us where this Greeno took the girl. Right now."

Flint saw a free-for-all shaping up. There seemed to be no other way out. He got ready for trouble, but he didn't think it was coming so quick.

Apparently the big patrolman was used to getting his information the hard way. His hand shot out in a short arc and swatted Flint across the mouth. "Talk!"

Flint staggered back, got his balance, and let go at the beefy face under the red cap. One of the other patrolmen caught his arm. The third one brought the barrel of his ray gun down on his head. Flint sat down on the jump seat.

"Where's Greeno's hideout?" the big one said. "You know every planetoid in the Ring. Where'd Greeno take her?"

Flint felt the bump on his head. "You and I got a lot of other things to discuss now, Fatty."

The beefy one stepped away from the door. "Okay. Go cut our rockets off, Mike," he said to one of his men who stood there, twirling Flint's ice gun on his forefinger. "This guy wants to play with us. We'll have to give him the air treatment."

As the one with the ice gun opened the door and went into the police plane, the other stuck his pistol in Flint's side. "Get up." And Flint knew he was really in for it now. He'd heard of this. Third degree? This was the *fourth* degree!

A SHIP had two doors, the inside one and one opening outside the hull. Between the two was a narrow air space. It was used as an air lock in which one could return to normal pressure before entering the ship from some thin-aired world. If you put a man in there and turned the pressure wide open—

"This makes even a Venusian talk," the big patrolman told Hudson and Leg-

gett. "When the pressure gets up around two hundred and their ear drums start cracking, they get mighty conversational."

When the patrolman who had gone into the police plane returned, he held the door open and the pistol in Flint's side pushed him toward it.

But at the door, the radio stopped them. The lawyer had left the speaker on.

"Calling Saturn Relay Station. Relay to Earth, to K. V. Vaun Fur Fashions, Inc., New York City. Message as follows: Miss Vaun has been kidnapped. She is held for one million dollars ransom. Forward to Saturn by tonight's Space Express one million dollars in raw platinum. Saturn Express Agency will be informed later how to deliver it. End of message."

The big patrolman turned to Flint standing beside the door. "Pretty smart, except that it didn't work." Then to the fellow holding the pistol at Flint's back: "Throw him in and squirt the air. I'll call Saturn and tell 'em to forget that relay message."

But once again the radio stopped them. "Look! At the door!" The voice was sharp and high. It was Karen Vaun's. "Keep still! Don't let it hear us!" Greeno again.

"What in hell—" the patrolman breathed.

"It's reaching in!" Karen's voice, a terrified whisper. "Look out for its claws!"

Two explosions rang out—Greeno's old bullet gun; he didn't have an ice pistol. Greeno yelled "Get back!" There was fright in even his mechanical voice as a dull crash merged with his words.

Then there was instant silence. Something had smashed Greeno's radio set.

"It's the bat!" Flint said. "It's got them cornered! We've got to get out there!" Somehow, now, the thought of that thing reaching into the door, clawing at Karen Vaun, pressed back against the wall, made him forget all about his plans for capturing the bat, forget he was under arrest for kidnapping. "Let's go—I'll take you to them!"

"It's another of his tricks," one of the patrolmen said. "Trying to lead us into a trap of some kind."

"Listen, you stupid fools," Flint almost yelled, "don't you understand? That bat's out there. They haven't a rabbit's chance. We haven't got time to talk about it."

The big fellow winked at the others. "If it's a space bat," he said, "we'll need help. I'll call for some of the boys to go with us, with some bigger guns—for the bat or for any little ambush you might have planned."

And Flint saw he was only wasting time. He leaped forward and caught the man full in the face with his fist. The blow sprawled the patrolman backward against the controls. Before he could get up, Flint was on him again, struggling for his gun. If he could get out of here, get that police plane—

He got his hand on the gun. Twisted. But it had taken too long.

He felt the hard jab of one of the patrolmen's pistol against his back. "Get off him!"

Flint stepped back slowly, hands hanging limp, ready for the slightest opening. But it didn't come.

The big man got off the controls, holding his hand over a nose that was probably broken. "Put him in that air lock," he ordered. "Give him enough pressure to cave his ribs in!"

The inside door was open. Flint was shoved into the lock. The door clanged shut behind him.

AROUND THE WALL in the narrow air chamber was a line of tiny holes. From these came a shrill hissing like a nest of snakes. The pointer of the pressure gauge on the wall trembled, then slowly moved across the dial.

The chamber was six feet high, three feet wide. The air holes were near the ceiling beside Flint's ears. But he didn't stand there listening to the rising pressure. A moment ago, one of the patrolmen had passed through here. Immediately, he tried the other door, the one leading outside where the police ship was hooked on, but it was locked now.

The doors of a space ship's safety chamber worked together. When one was locked, the other locked automatically. But when one door was unlocked, the other was also unlocked. He leaned against the outside door, his mind racing. If he could stay conscious against the air pressure—if he could slip through this outside door when they opened the inner one—he'd be in the police plane—

The pressure gauge was calibrated in pounds. With each mark the pointer climbed, he shuddered. He jammed his fingers into his ears, closed his eyes, swallowed constantly. His face turned white under rivulets of sweat.

His shirt was quickly soaked through, his big arms wet and glistening. Swiftly he felt his strength leaving him. The pointer on the gauge quivered at the hundred mark, slowly climbed higher.

Flint found his knees sagging. His heart pounded with the exertion of standing up. His body had turned to lead. And in his mind was the terrible fear that he'd black out completely, be lying there on the floor when the other door unlocked and gave him his only chance.

But he *couldn't* black out! He had to keep on his feet! He was Karen's and Greeno's only chance.

The pointer stood at a hundred and fifty. His ribs felt as if steel bands were being tightened around his chest. He couldn't breathe. He knew he couldn't stand much more.

He turned his head toward the inside door and with all the lung power he could find yelled, "Let me out! I'll talk!"

They heard him. The whistling in his ears ceased for one second, then returned, but now it was the sucking sound of air going out. He got hold of the outer door handle, leaned his weight back against it. His glazed eyes were on the pressure dial. He knew the men in the ship were watching its counterpart.

The pointer came back around slowly and each jump brought blessed relief as the pressure slackened. It was like a tremendous weight being lifted from every square inch of his body.

When the pointer hit zero, he heard the lock click in the door behind him and the door against which he was pulling swung suddenly open. He almost fell backward, then managed to struggle forward through the door.

"Stop him! He's trying to get into our ship!"

He heard feet clattering through the chamber after him. He slammed the door against a beefy blurred face. Stumbling through the double doors of the police plane's air chamber, he managed to close and lock them against his pursuers. Then

he staggered over to the control panel.

He cut the switch, pressed the starter. The jets roared behind him as he shot away from his own plane.

THE JETS had left a vapor trail miles long before he could look back. He saw the flare of his own ship as it started in pursuit but he knew they'd never overtake him with the busted fuel pump and he wasn't worrying now about their following his trail later with a blast analyzer. He wasn't worrying about anything that would happen later. All he was thinking about now was Greeno and the girl.

His own ship was no longer in sight when he swept into the outskirts of the Ring. He remembered to step up the air pressure to avoid the bends. Then, a little grimly, he smiled. There on the control panel was his ice pistol where the patrolman had left it. He stuck it in his empty holster. His luck was turning.

Whipping in and out of the rough-hewn worlds, the police clock had ticked off only ten minutes when in the distance ahead he could see the sagging cable between the two little globes that were Greeno's domain. He remembered Greeno's words that very day, "You, my friend of many seasons." He remembered the way Karen Vaun looked with her hair trailing on her shoulders, her blue eyes . . .

If only it wasn't too late.

He flashed over the twin planetoids, circled around their far side. It was easy to tell the bat had been there. For miles around, the jungle was criss-crossed with splintered tree tops where its wing tips had brushed them like a hurricane. Then, coming round to the spot where Greeno's shack was, Flint saw the real scene of violence. What had been a small clearing in the brush, not even large enough to land on, was an area big as a football field. And in the center of it lay the bat.

The thing lay there like a blotch of spilled ink, grotesque and horrible. It was using horny claws on the tips of its wings to slam Greeno's space-ship house back and forth like a nut. Greeno and Karen must be inside.

Flint streaked down, thumbs trembling on the triggers of the police plane's guns. He held his screaming dive till he was within yards of the thing. Then into its

back he poured his stream of liquid fire. Kicking the controls, he zoomed away, head craned back to watch the result.

The bat came up like a volcano erupting. There was a wide furrow burned along its black hairy back. Trees bent hundreds of yards away under the beat of its wings. Rising high in the greenish twilight, it sailed over the planetoid, searching for its attacker.

Flint circled higher still. Far below he saw two small figures crawl out of the house, stare upward. Karen and Greeno were safe, so far.

Banking over, looking down at them, Flint's eyes left the bat for a second. In that second the bat's eyes found him. It was upon him with the speed of a glance. It came on, unmindful of the jet blast in its face, its hair singeing like a grass fire. And though Flint threw the ship into every contortion he knew—full throttle five, bullet roll, reverse jet dodge, everything—the bat stayed on his tail, following his every maneuver as if it knew what he was going to do in advance.

Its wings worked in a dark blur, trying to gain the few yards to close its pile-driver jaws upon the plane. Slowly, inexorably, the space between the beast and the plane narrowed. Then Flint played his final card, the same trick he'd used with the bat before.

He dived for the planetoid, straight down, holding it till his nerves screamed with the wind, the bat right behind him. Then, almost in the tree tops, he pulled out. He stared back over his shoulder. If the bat plunged on into the jungle, if it floundered there for one minute, the plane's guns might be able to burn a wing off. He watched the bat twisting out of its dive, tree tops splaying.

Then it happened.

A WISP in the view-plate, a hair-line growing, rushing at the nose of the plane. Before Flint turned in time to see it, the cable that stretched between the twin planetoids had been struck by the plane's nose, had screeched along its side in a shower of sparks. Then it caught. A solid jolt.

The little hooks along the hull, the device for boarding another ship, had caught the cable, jerked it free from one of the

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planetoids and torn out by the roots the tree to which the other end was anchored.

When Flint again got the plane under control, it mushed along, weighed down by a ton of steel cable that had a full-grown tree dangling on its far end.

Flint's first thought was of the bat. He glanced around frantically. But the cable had stopped the plane so abruptly and the bat had swept back up so fast, it was now well beyond the range of its weak eyes. And as Flint watched, it apparently forgot the plane, glided across the jungle like a great shadow, headed back toward Greeno and the girl.

Pressing his eye to the filterscope, Flint brought them up close, standing in the wreckage of the trees, scanning the sky. They didn't know the bat was on the way back, coming in low now behind them.

"Run!" Flint yelled the word as if they could hear him across the five miles between them. Standing there beside Greeno, Karen Vaun's hair glistened in the twilight, her eyes looking right at him, almost as if she could see him. Flint beat his fists on the control panel helplessly.

Then they heard the rush of the bat's wings behind them. They whirled, stood there frozen before the gigantic creature hurtling at them. Then, too late to run back for the house, they fled toward the woods. And the woods was just where the bat wanted them.

Flint knew he had to get there now. He had to do something quick. The bat started systematically flattening the trees, searching for them in the terrifying way it always hunted its prey. Four times the size of an elephant, the winged monster splintered like matchsticks hundred-foot high mahogany and ironwood trees.

Flint's hands jerked the plane's controls as if he could hurl it bodily forward, dragging the weight of cable and tree behind him. But the ship was now a winged snail. And when he *did* get there, he knew there wasn't a chance of getting the bat in his sights. He couldn't outmaneuver it any more. And there was no time now to land and do what he could afoot with a pistol.

Then, with his hand on the ice pistol's butt, his eyes on the raging bat slowly nearing below, an idea flared in his head that brought him to his feet like an electric shock.

QUICKLY, he headed the plane down toward the bat, set automatic pilot. Then, fingers flying, he ripped a wire from the control panel, looped one end through his pistol's trigger guard, the other end through his belt. Then he ran to the door.

Standing in the air lock, he forced the outside door against the wind. He looked down at the cable, caught firmly on the hook, dangling under the plane. He reached out, got his hand on the cable and swung out over the jungle far below. The door clanged shut behind him.

He started down the cable hand over hand. Guided by the automatic pilot, the ship moved slowly ahead. He got down the cable and into the dangling tree.

It was like climbing a tree in a cyclone as he fought his way through the branches to a limb he could lock his legs around. Then, with a scissors hold on the limb, he sat upright and drew the ice pistol from its holster.

Down below, the bat had smashed a wide area of trees and was hunting Greeno and Karen like mice in the tall grass. When it heard the plane, it twisted up, circled suspiciously. The tree and the cable confused it for a moment. But only for a moment. Then its tiny brain sent it toward its persistent enemy, the plane.

It came by so close and its hairy mass was so immense, Flint caught his breath. There was nothing to aim at with a pistol. It was too big. He just pointed the gun at the expanse of hair and pulled the trigger as fast as he could work his finger.

Instantly, one great wing of the creature went rigid. It was the wing nearest Flint and the bat slid that way. The black mass of hair, each hair a full yard long, swept

upon him. The branches of the tree caved in. The cable was snatched from the plane. Flint clawed at the monster's side blindly. He caught a handful of hair. The bat flailed the air wildly with its other wing, a hundred tons of solid flesh falling—

Then the whole world exploded around Flint. Tree trunks cracking, green vegetation whirling past him, then a stunning thud as the bat struck the ground, shaking the whole forest.

Like a man fleeing some horror in a nightmare, Flint tore his way through the stalks of hair, leaped to the ground and ran into the jungle.

When he finally stopped running, safely away from the bat's hammering wings and claws, he saw he was now permanently safe. It had beaten its good wing to shreds in the trees. When the effect of the ice gun wore off, it wouldn't be able to fly.

Slowly, Flint grinned. He glanced down, saw his ice pistol dangling the length of its wire against his knee. Almost tenderly, he picked it up, untied the wire, and stuck the gun into its holster.

Greeno and Karen ran toward him through the woods. Their faces were scratched, their clothes in tatters. Karen's feet were bare; she had lost her shoes, removed her stockings. Her hair was tangled, a raven mop on her half-bare shoulders.

She seemed on the verge of collapse but her cheeks and eyes, despite the weariness of her grim experience, glowed. Today's excitement had completely displaced her cultivated pose of boredom by the fresh beauty of a jungle flower.

And it had done something to Flint too. He ran to meet them, caught the girl as she fell toward him. "Are you all right?"

She was too breathless to speak. "We all right," Greeno said. "But almost weren't." He held out his arm. From shoulder to wrist was a wide deep scratch, a claw mark.

Then the sudden sound of rockets turned all their faces skyward. High over the trees, circling lower, came three patrol planes and Flint's ship.

Flint's fingers tightened on the girl's arm. "Greeno," he said, "we have to get out of here, hide in the woods." He said it sadly, tired of the game now. He had forgotten it wasn't over. He looked down



into the girl's face. "Miss Vaun," he said quickly, "this was all my fault. I won't ask you to forgive me but I want you to know I'm sorry, not for trying to do what I could to protect the feather-deer, but because this business came so close to ending in a tragedy much worse than your slaughtering them all."

He dropped his hands, turned to the jungle. Greeno was standing at the edge of the woods, waiting for him. He started walking slowly.

Then suddenly he turned, came back to the girl quickly. "Might as well be shot for a sheep as a lamb," he said. He put a hand under her chin, kissed her soundly on the lips, then ran toward the woods.

When he was halfway there, he heard her cry, "Mr. Flint! Wait!" It occurred to him that she probably didn't even know his first name. He didn't look back. And Miss Karen Vaun did a very strange thing.

She had one hand behind her as Flint ran away. Now she brought it forth and in it was Flint's own ice pistol. She raised it, took careful aim and pulled the trigger.

Flint's legs stopped in midstride, knees bent one before the other, like a stop-motion movie. He sprawled forward.

Before he could get up, the girl was beside him. She sat down on his back, pinning him to the ground. "Next time you kiss a girl without knowing whether she wants to be kissed or not," she said, "hang onto your gun."

Then the police, with Hudson and Leggett, were crowded around them.

"Are you all right, Miss Vaun?"

Flint lay there feeling very foolish.

But the girl ignored the crowd, still talking to him, "You didn't know I was an ice pistol expert, too, did you? You didn't know I was in the fur business because my father used to be a trapper on Venus. When I was twelve years old, I could bring down a tigodon at a half a mile."

The beefy-faced patrolman, his nose bandaged now, said, "If you'll get up, Miss Vaun, we'll take care of him now."

The others were staring at the space bat, flopping about feebly a short distance away, its awful strength spent.

"Leggett," the fur merchant said to the

lawyer, "think what a *rug* that would make for the firm's front office!"

"Miss Vaun can also come into a nice bit of cash from that circus for it," one of the other patrolmen said. "This is her land—or soon will be—and the bat's on it. Where Flint's going, he won't be able to claim anything."

The big patrolman helped Karen up. Flint stumbled to his feet. The patrolman grabbed him by the collar, roughly. "Come along, kidnapper," he said.

Karen Vaun stared at the patrolman blankly. "*Kidnapper?*"

THE PATROLMAN FROWNED.

"Certainly, Miss Vaun. Don't you know this guy engineered the whole business—having you taken off his plane? He and that Venusian were going to hold you for ransom."

Karen shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said. "Greeno was merely bringing me out to look at these planetoids while Mr. Flint went to get his big guns for the bat. Kidnapper? Preposterous! Mr. Flint and I are buying these planetoids *together*."

"What!" Leggett and Hudson said the word simultaneously. And they seemed the only ones in the crowd who could speak. "Together!" Leggett said weakly. "Why this area is a million dollar investment!"

"Two million," Karen said. She took Flint's hand, he standing there as dumbfounded as the rest. "Mr. Flint's going to contribute a million of his own from the sale of the bat. We're going to raise feather-deer here. It would be bad business to kill them all off." She paused, surveying the crowd as if daring anybody to disagree with her. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we'll get back to Saturn. We have business to discuss." Then she glanced toward the jungle. "Greeno!" she called. "Aren't you coming with us? If you're going to be foreman around our feather-deer ranch, you've got to be in on the conferences."

Greeno stepped out of the shadows, a faint smile softening his stony face. "Attend later conferences," he said. "From what is in your thoughts, don't think I should attend this one."

Karen Vaun blushed, then led Flint quickly away toward his plane.



Ho Dyak put her down and turned to face the drag.

FOG OF THE FORGOTTEN

By BASIL WELLS

The fog of their world matched the fog in their minds. Rebellling against science, they smashed it, dragged their people down into the ancient mists. But Ho Dyak wanted light.

THE FOG SEA thinned before Ho Dyak, and he could see the dank rocks of the cliffs he scaled a scant twenty feet beneath his feet. The network of blue-veined pale vines that he climbed

thinned even as the air itself thinned. Far below him in the lowlands the mat of *agan* vines was three hundred feet in depth in many places.

Higher and higher climbed Ho Dyak,

his long pale face, with its full red lips and great thick-lidded purple eyes, drawn with pain. For the air of the uplands was chill. As the fog thinned, so too dropped the temperature.

Ho Dyak gripped tighter the pouch of flayed *drogskin*, in which five of the forbidden foot-long cylinders of metal skins nestled, as he paused for a moment to rest. It was because of them, the forbidden scrolls stored in a musty forgotten chamber of the Upper Shrine of Lalal, the One God of Arba, that Ho Dyak was now climbing into the frigid death of the cloudless uplands.

The ivory-skinned body of the man was swathed in layer upon layer of quilted and padded garments of leather and fabric. His two feet, with their webbed outstretched toes, and his short stubby middle limbs, strong-fingered webbed hands at their ends, were encased in sturdy mitten-like moccasins. Only his long upper hands were encased in stout leather gloves with four divisions—one for the thumb and the other three for his four-jointed fingers.

Over his grotesquely swollen bulk, for which his myriad garments were responsible, Ho Dyak's sword belt and the filled sheath of javelin-like darts were belted. To his crossed belts also were attached his broad-bladed machete-like knife and the throwing stick for his dwarfish spears.

No longer did he fear pursuit. The fighting priests, the dark-robed *orsts* of Lalal, had brought with them none of the warm garments Ho Dyak wore. Their shouts and sacred battle cries had died away on the slopes a mile or more beneath where he now perched. For the moment he was safe from their vengeance.

"I will see what lies above the fog sea," said Ho Dyak to the unresponsive ladder-like network of *agan* he climbed. "Perhaps I can, for a few short hours, see the vast plateaus that once my people ruled."

The *agan* made no answer, as Ho Dyak had expected it would not, but he bent his gaze more closely upon its smooth stems. A greenish tinge lay upon them, a tinge that in the lowlands only the rocks or tarnished metals bore. The man's heart beat faster despite the chilling cold. He was approaching an unknown zone of life!

The fog sea split apart abruptly. His broad shoulders and then his thickly pad-

ded middle came above the last remnants of the mist. And he sensed a warmth that came from above—not a pleasant warmth, but a strangely stinging heat. He turned his hooded eyes skyward and pain filled his brain at the glaring redness of the lights that blazed there. Three sons, one huge primary and its offspring, that hung in the cloud-banked blue heavens overhead.

DARKNESS dwindled into grayness and he could see. He was looking out across a level rolling expanse of fleecy nothingness. A soft sea of foggy mystery from which vagrant hills of vapor drifted upward lightly and settled back again. Down beneath that impenetrable damp blanket, he knew, lay the pleasant stone buildings and palaces of his people, and further away out there rolled the gloomy steaming sea of Thol where men fished and hunted for the mighty aquatic monsters of the deeps.

It was as though his homeland had never been, and he was a castaway here on this sun-drenched vine-covered slope with the blood chilling in his muscular squat body. He shivered.

He looked upward and his heart hammered new warmth into his muscles as he saw that the rim of the mighty wall he ascended was but a score of feet above. He swung himself upward swiftly.

Then he was standing upon a level expanse of grassy land beside a slow-flowing brook. The stream was clogged with aquatic lush vegetation, and further up along it he saw moving shapes, lizard-like creatures and four-legged graceful animals that were covered with a dusty golden fur. Beyond was a jungle of vine-linked growth, and far beyond that a vast escarpment climbed, step upon step, upward to the white-helmeted peaks of a mountain range.

It was at this moment that Ho Dyak became aware of the ragged roaring sound from overhead. He squinted his eyes and was careful not to look into the terrible flare of light that was the suns. The sound increased. After a moment he saw a dark speck low down to the western horizon, a speck that grew into a long stub-winged shape with vapor flaring like smoke from its rear.

At first Ho Dyak thought that some

living monstrous thing was diving upon him, and then he saw the fixed rigidity of the boatlike elongated craft. This was a man-made thing, a ship that rode noisily through the air even as the great canoes of the fisherfolk sailed upon the hot waves of mighty Thol.

It was thus that the ancestors of his race had ridden in the long-dead ages before the fog seas shrank downward from the mountains and plateaus. This was one of the machines that his embittered race had destroyed after cataclysmic disaster swept their world. He had thought that only in these precious stolen scrolls was there any record of that mighty civilization; yet here before his eyes a mighty thing of metal dropped swiftly.

Then the winged thing seemed to explode and crumple as it nosed into the green expanse of tangled grasses near him. Flames licked out from the rear of the craft!

THREE DAYS HAD PASSED there upon the plateau shelf above the fog sea. And Ho Dyak had not returned to the welcome warmth of the lowlands of Arba. Instead, he had found a great spring of boiling water in the rocky valley not far from the crashed ship of the sky, and about this he had built a sturdy dome of clay-plastered stones. Within this comfortably damp and well-heated den Ho Dyak sprawled and talked through the slitted doorway that was closed with triple hides of giant upland lizards.

"I do not understand," said the lanky sandy-haired man who sat, sweating, outside the steaming mud-daubed mound, "why your people, with their marvelous control of telepathy and their one-time control over all this world, are content to live in savagery along the narrow strip of beach they now possess."

Ho Dyak did not move his lips as he answered. Unlike the Earthman from the *Lo*, he did not need to speak aloud to transmit his thoughts. His hasty schooling of the two men and the girl he had rescued from the battered *Lo* had been designed to afford immediate communication. Later he would impress upon their brains the process of speechless transmission.

"Inventions, mechanical knowledge,

brought about the downfall of Arba, Glade Nelson. Lest any further destructive device do away with our last zone of liveable atmosphere all mechanical knowledge and experimentation is forbidden."

The Earthman snorted. "I know that, Hodiak," he said, using his own word for the squat ivory-skinned man, "but with pressure cities, transparent domes you know, and heated suits like the space suit we gave you, there's no reason why your ancient lands should remain abandoned."

"I agree with you, Earthman. Some of the wisest men of Arba have felt the same. But the priests of Lalal have branded them, branded them with blindness, and driven them out into the *agan* jungles. They are content with the barbaric simplicity of the lowlands."

"Perhaps," said Glade Nelson, "now that you have escaped with your life and your vision you can help your people in spite of themselves."

Ho Dyak shook his big square head. The broad curly tendrils that sprouted yellowly from his skull half-covered the delicate sharp tips of his upthrust thin ears.

"The power of Lalal over the common people is no light thing."

The thoughts of the Earthman were confused for a moment and then Ho Dyak heard, through the ears of Nelson, the frantic screams of the Earthwoman, the dark-haired sister of Nelson's employer, hairy, stocky Albert Gosden.

NELSON snatched his high-powered rifle and raced away toward the sound. Ho Dyak sprang to his feet as well and slipped swiftly into the space suit that Nelson had provided him. He set the heat controls for a comfortable 200 degrees and pushed aside the hide curtains.

He went racing after the Earthman. Although unhampered by the cumbersome space suit Ho Dyak wore and fleet of foot, Nelson saw the ivory man go racing by him and he marveled at the strength and vitality of the squat Arban. Then they were at the stream, beside a swampy lake, dotted here and there with tree islets and banks of reeds, searching for the girl.

They saw her flailing away at a swarm of scaly black lizard things, young seven and eight foot-long *drogs*, with a leafy

branch. She was safe enough from them as she sat in the crotch of a moss-hung jungle giant at the lake's green-scummed rim. But Ho Dyak saw the ripples that were converging on the girl from other portions of the pool, and he reached down to the weapons belted now about his dull-sheened space suit.

"Albert's dead!" Marta Gosden sobbed, thwacking away. There was a bloody broken thing, or rather, things, that some of the young *drogs* quarreled over in the thick muddy shallows.

Ho Dyak was busy now with his copper-tipped javelins. He was killing as swiftly as his throwing stick could contact the sturdy butts of the javelins.

"Kill them," he flashed at Nelson, "for the grown monsters come."

But the lanky man with only two arms did not heed his order. In the excitement of the moment Nelson had reverted to the use of his ears—his mental receptive powers were as yet too untrained. Ho Dyak fought alone while Glade Nelson shouted to the girl to climb down a drooping limb toward him.

Ho Dyak drove the crawling lizard-beasts back until he stood beneath the tree. He held up his two upper arms, and the girl dropped her leafy useless club before she slid down the loose rough bark of the trunk. Then Ho Dyak turned and raced with her in his arms away from the lake.

Nelson roared with sudden fear. Almost upon Ho Dyak's heels a huge mouth gaped suddenly from the murky water and then a scaly six-legged monster came charging up over the low marshy bank. Behind the first *drog* came another, and then another. All of them were over twenty feet in length and their pace was not slow. They were overhauling the burdened ivory man.

Ho Dyak put the girl down. He gave her a push in the direction of the wrecked ship and with the same motion turned to face the *drog's* gaping maw. His stout double-edged sword was in his hand. He could feel its welcome pressure through the insulated layers of *sikadur* that sealed out the chill air of the plateau.

His sword flicked up toward the eye of the huge dragon. He pressed the button that released the needle-like extension from the weapon's tip, and his prolonged weapon ripped through the huge reddish eyeball.

The monster roared with rage, and whistling with its blasting breath, swung its head. Again the sword flashed and the blinded monster dashed itself against a huge smooth-boled tree. Its legs crumpled for a moment and then it was ^{up} ripping ferociously with great nails and rending jaws at the unresisting wood.

By now Nelson had taken a hand. His rocket projectiles were shattering the armor-plated *drogs*. They were down upon the swampy turf, their mighty bulks crimsoned and torn, and yet they hissed and growled while their dead limbs shredded the dank black muck.

The Earthman turned his weapon upon the unseen lizard thing and blew its head from its ugly scaly neck. Even then the legs continued to strip bark from the great tree, nor did the great body collapse for several long minutes.

Ho Dyak cleaned his sword-tip and pressed it back upon the spring at its base. Then he went to Nelson and the girl. She had come back when she saw the *drogs* were down. Nelson was holding the girl in his arms, talking softly to her. He could see in their unguarded minds that they loved one another.

So it was that he turned abruptly away, and went back to his comfortable steam-heated igloo of stones. Memories of Mian Ith, she of the rioting pinkish-brown tendrils and the full-breasted slim young body, came to him. Memory of the Earthman's words came to him and his full lips smiled. Yes, he could rebel and lead others.

"Tomorrow," he told himself, "I will go again to the Place of Lalal. There I will find others of the precious scrolls of the ancients. And when I return I will bring with me Mian Ith."

With the knowledge of the Earthman coupled with his own he might indeed restore to his people the empire they had lost when the fog seas shrank away . . .

GLADE NELSON, the Earthman, walked as far as the rim of the lower plateau with Ho Dyak. And, before he swung down into the foggy lake that hid the lowlands and the sea of Thol, he told the Earthman that he might not return.

"If I do not come back," he said, "there is a possibility that you can return to Earth."

Nelson laughed half-heartedly. "Not in the *Lo*," he said.

"Naturally," Ho Dyak flashed back, "but your helicopter, that you planned to use for exploration on that other planet—"

"Mars," supplied Nelson. "Gosden financed the trip and purchased the ship for me. I'd had experience with submarines and aircraft during the Second War, and Gosden knew me then. His sister stowed away aboard. We were several thousand miles out into space when we discovered her. We turned back to Earth then; our supplies were insufficient."

Ho Dyak smiled. "When was it," he wanted to know, "that you realized something was so terribly wrong—that this was not your home planet?"

"Almost as soon as we had sighted your world of Thrane," said Nelson. "Then we saw the three suns and the two extra planets of your system." He lighted one of his last cigarettes. "Just how did we get here?"

"Probably hit a space-time-material eddy. Our scientists created an artificial eddy, a sort of gateway you might say, between parallel worlds. That's how we lost our dense protective atmospheric envelope. The vibrational gateways, in the course of many years' usage, became permanent. Our ancestors no longer could seal them shut by cutting off the power.

"And so our precious atmosphere drained off into a dozen parallel dimensional worlds. Fortunately the gateways were on the upper plateaus and so a thin envelope of denser air remains. But one of those doors leads through to Earth! Maybe several of them."

Nelson gripped Ho Dyak's bulky shoulder.

"You mean," he gasped, "this is really Earth? Only changed?"

Ho Dyak agreed. "Something like water and sand," he explained, "when they're mixed together. They're distinct but occupy the same space." He turned toward the sea of fog and stepped down into it.

HE SLIPPED through the sheltering upper layer of *agan* vines, their huge disc-shaped leaves of blue-veined yellow as a protective screen about him. Here, three hundred feet above the mucky soil, the thick rubbery coils were not matted

together into a solid wall as they were much lower.

He was soon approaching the seacoast city of Gorda, capital and chief city of the priest-ruled nation of Arba. He saw where the floor of writhing pale vegetable stems dropped away abruptly to the mile-wide clearing that the heavy blades of convicted criminals kept cleared away. The shouts of the men, as they hung back on their ropes and hewed at the thick fleshy wall of growth, came faintly to his ears from the fog-shroud off to his left.

The sound of the booming surf came now from the right. He could not see further away than fifteen feet, although his heavy-lidded purple eyes were sharper than the majority of his people, but by the muffled sounds of the city below and the steady throb of the surf's drumbeat, he knew that he was nearing the forgotten twin spikes of a ruined tower. Directly opposite this tower the Place of Lalal heaped its thirty levels, terrace upon terrace, into the eternal thick mistiness of the fog sea.

Then he saw the tips of the tower, two man-made juts of metal ten feet apart and covered with great orange and golden knobs of wrinkled warty fungi. The round holes of *sliran* tunnels gaped beside the vine-buried dome of the ruined tower—the many-legged blue-scaled snaky lengths of those hideous monsters had kept open a rounded tube something over three feet in diameter.

Ho Dyak had been here before. He drew his sword and lowered himself into the steep slanting hole. As he descended he heard from above the increasingly louder voices of men—some of the workers and their guards were passing. He had entered the *sliran* burrow none too soon. And now, if he did not encounter a *sliran* in the vine-walled tube, he would shortly be inside the helmet dome of one-time silvery metal that capped the deserted tower.

A moment later he stepped from the tunnel into the moist thick heat of the broken dome. The broad phosphorescent band of light that was built into the walls of all Arban architecture, waist-high, was dimmed by the slime of ages. But he could see. The dome's interior was not occupied by any of the huge stubby-legged snakes. The *slirans* spent most of their lives in the

muddy pools and root caverns at ground level.

He turned down the ramp that wound into the depths. A forgotten stone-walled passage led under the city walls into the heart of the massive stone pile that was the Place of Lalal. And there, in the pleasant upper-level quarters of the One Orst, the high priest of Lalal, lived the daughter of the One Orst, Mian Ith!

FROM his leather jerkin and his weapons, some time later, Ho Dyak wiped the slime and encrusted mud. He was hidden in a deserted apartment upon the fourteenth level, the same level that housed the children and mates of the One Orst. Thus far had his dark robe, the garment of a fighting priest who now lay trussed-up with his own harness on the second level, brought him.

Suddenly he crouched behind a massive chest of hammered silver. The apartment's oval stone door-slab was swinging inward! Ho Dyak's sword cleared the leather of his sheath silently. He recognized the voice of the woman who entered the room—Mian Ith! And behind her came a man, a blue-robed priest, one of the seekers after wisdom pledged to the celibate life of a thinker. He wondered why the woman he adored came stealthily to this musty, empty place with this dreamy-eyed seer of the mysteries of Lalal.

"My darling!" cried Mian Ith, her arms going about the slight body of the thinker. "It is so long since we were together!"

"I feared," answered the seeker, his soft high-pitched voice more feminine than Mian Ith's, "that Ho Dyak would persuade your father that you should be his mate. He, like you, wore the red robes of the priestly rulers."

Mian Ith laughed. "The great muscled fool," she sneered. "He thought that I loved him. He told me of his studies in the forbidden books of the Ancients. Iiy! but did he reveal his twisted unbelieving soul to me! It was a little matter to lay a trap for him—to rid myself of him forever."

Ho Dyak felt his lips curl back from his teeth with scorn and hatred. This, this—woman! Say, rather, this female *sliran*. She had betrayed him to the priests of Lalar that she might be free to con-

tinue her forbidden trysts with this puny seeker! It was true. He could read the woman's unshielded mind now. He had never attempted to do so heretofore.

Two slashes of his keen-edged bronze sword and he would be avenged. And yet Ho Dyak shook his head even as the thought came to him. He was well rid of the false-tongued Mian Ith and the dreamy-eyed seeker he despised. Better had Mian Ith chosen a stalwart black-robed warrior or yellow-robed toiler for her lover.

The man and the woman moved into the other room, their four arms interlocked and their soft head tendrils mingled in that half-embrace. And Ho Dyak slipped from the outer door into the corridor beyond. A half-ruined ramp within the walls, a ramp sealed off ages past and revealed to the boy, Ho Dyak, by a dislodged block of masonry, opened off the ramp a level above. In this way had Ho Dyak climbed in the bygone years to the Upper Shrine of Lalal and taken from the thousands of inscribed metal scrolls those he wished to study.

He would go to the Upper Shrine, fill his pouch with other slim metal skin records of the past, and take as well certain small mysterious objects sealed in crystal-line spheres. The Earthman might know their purpose.

And so Ho Dyak ascended the ramp and squeezed through the shadowed opening so familiar to him.

Later, Ho Dyak turned for a last look about the Upper Shrine. He saw crystal-walled cases and unrusting metal devices of the Ancients. Here was static knowledge and machinery that might make Arba the mightiest nation upon the shores of the Sea of Thol. He touched lightly the pouch where nine more of the precious metal scrolls nested. Perhaps after all these centuries the wisdom of the forgotten ages would come to life beneath his four hands' clumsy touch.

It was then that the javelins came from the grayness of the Shrine's further corners.

THE ONE ORST had laid a trap here for Ho Dyak, that profaner of the sacred place, should he ever return!

One javelin pierced his side and another passed completely through the upper

muscles of his left middle arm. A third keen-tipped miniature spear struck the handle of his sword and its copper point blunted harmlessly.

From the gray twilight that was all the day men knew beneath the fog sea, there poured a dozen black-robed fighting men. Swords they carried, some of them two and three, and many of them bore the barbed nooses of woven *droghide* with which they bound prisoners before they were driven, blinded, from Gorda.

Ho Dyak rushed through the panel of stone into the ancient sealed rampway. He paused long enough here to tear the javelin from his side, and was relieved to find that it had ploughed shallowly across his ribs. Then he raced down the dimly lighted narrow way.

This time he did not attempt to use the opening on the fifteenth level. The corridors of the Place of Lalal would be swarming with black-robed warrior-priests and poorly armed yellow-robed toilers. Instead he raced on down the ramp into the dank stench of the lower levels. For the unused ramp led into the same great underground storage cave that he had entered from the rocky tunnel beneath the city walls.

Bricked-up and partially sealed was its end, and for this reason he had not ascended that way. Signs of his passing must have shown in a litter of chipped cement and displaced yellowish slime had he done so. But now he could shove the wall outward and race toward freedom. What matter, now, if they found a gaping hole in an apparently solid supporting pillar of masonry?

He put his eye to the broken wall as he reached the great basement cave in this part of the underground citadel beneath the Place. Apparently no guards had been posted here as yet. He lunged against the wall and it clattered down. Then he darted across the slippery muck and sprouting toadstool growth to the hidden entrance to the tunnel leading outside.

Even then he heard the rasp of the scaly black plates of hunting *drogs*, the domesticated long-limbed smaller lizards that the warriors of Arba use in hunting upon the *agan* jungle's upper terrace for the bat-winged wild lizards and white-fleshed, tender, legless serpents so prized

on Arban tables. The black-robed ones had turned their swift *drogs* upon his trail! His only safety lay in flight.

Almost had he reached the abandoned tower when the hunting *drogs* were upon him. Even as they reached his heels Ho Dyak cast a despairing glance upward—and saw one of the ancient ventilating shafts that supplied air to this buried way.

He sprang upward and his fingers closed upon a tough *agan* root. A moment later all four of his hands were gripping other roots and he was climbing carefully up through a rounded shaft.

Below him the hunting *drogs* leaped high into the air and fell back again, whistling, growling and screaming in their saurian stupid way. Twenty feet he had climbed before a solid mat of *agan* blocked further upward progress. Ho Dyak clung to the huge hairy white roots and peered about him.

Meanwhile the Place's warriors came swiftly up with their six-limbed lizard beasts. A cry of triumph came up to Ho Dyak.

"Come down, Ho Dyak!" one of them shouted, "and we will not permit the *drogs* to destroy you."

Ho Dyak laughed shortly. "It is you who will destroy me," he said, "and not the *drogs*. I prefer the *drogs*."

"Surrender, Ho Dyak," cried the man menacingly, "at once, and the One Orst may but take from you your eyes. Delay and his tame *drogs* will eat your limbs, one by one, as you yet live."

"I prefer a javelin," mocked Ho Dyak. "The death is clean and merciful."

"Then take it!" shouted the man, drawing back his throwing stick.

But even as a hail of javelins hummed upward Ho Dyak was in motion. He had swung on his shaggy ladder of roots into a ragged crevice in the side of the shaft. And so the javelins buried themselves only in the rubbery coils of *agan*. A howl of rage rolled up through the old ventilating shaft.

Ho Dyak crawled further into the narrow crevice. At every instant he expected to find that the probing roots or stems of the fleshy *agan* had closed this last hope of escape, but as time passed and the way widened he began to hope. Other tunnels branched off from time to time and he

crawled through tepid pools of foul water in which he sensed the wriggling of hideous alien things with scaly-finned limbs and tails. The blackness was total. He groped onward.

AND THEN he fell forward into a blackness that was not total and found himself squatting in the shallow muck of a sullen underground river. Or perhaps that lightless roof overhead was but the matted stems and roots of the sunless vines of the fog seas. He saw a faint luminous glow that came from the river. Thousands of tiny light-producing aquatic plant-animals swarmed in the depths.

He saw a raft of tied buoyant *agan* stems, huge two-foot sections ten and eleven feet long, and poling it along with a tough spear of hide-bound bone, was a woman in a scant, ragged tunic. At the same instant she saw him.

"In Lalal's name," she demanded, "why do you sit in the water so? Are not there few enough warriors in the two caves of the Outcasts without offering yourself thus freely to the water *slirans*?"

Ho Dyak realized that this was one of the blinded Outcasts, turned out to die in the jungles because they dared question the rule of the One Orst and his priestly underlings.

"I am Ho Dyak," he said, "who is hunt-

ed by the black-robed ones, the *orsts*."

"We have heard of you, Ho Dyak," the blind girl said, "and we welcome you to the poor sanctuary of our caves." She poled the raft nearer. "I am Sarn Vod, daughter of Dra Vod."

"Dra Vod is your father!" cried Ho Dyak. "I have heard of him. He built a machine powered by the sap of pressed *agan* for his boat!"

"Aye," agreed the girl, "and his reward was blindness. Of the three hundred Outcasts in our rocky caves a hundred are sightless."

"You can see!" Ho Dyak burst out. He was looking into the beautiful slim face of the girl. She was more beautiful than Mian Ith had ever been. From that moment Ho Dyak forgot the faithless One Orst's daughter. . .

"Of course," agreed the girl, laughing. "I was born after my father was taken into the hidden village of the Outcasts."

They sat close together, then, in the raft, and Ho Dyak opened his mind to the mind of the girl. She in turn opened her mind to him. It was not long that they sat thus but when Sarn Vod took up the pole of bone again they had found that they loved one another.

Never before had Ho Dyak allowed another to probe into the remoter recesses of his brain. But he knew that she could be trusted. Her childlike acceptance of him



"In Lalal's name," she demanded, "why do you sit in the water so?"

even before he opened his thoughts to her convinced him of that.

"I will go with you to the camp of the Earthman," she told Ho Dyak softly, as they neared the upreared hillock of soft gray rock from which their two cave homes had been laboriously scraped.

"It is good," agreed Ho Dyak, "and later, when we have found a secure place, I will come back for your people. The Outcasts will be the first to share with us the wisdom of the Ancients."

Sarn Vod flashed him a quick mental caress as the raft grounded in the shelter of an overhanging ledge. He stepped to take her in his arms, and halted as a giant of a man groped toward them. Where his eyes had been there were now but empty sockets.

"My father," said the girl, "Dra Vod!"

"And my father as well," said Ho Dyak, leaping to the blind man's side, and his two middle arms locked with the elbows of Dra Vod's short middle arms.

Dra Vod's own powerful webbed fingers gripped Ho Dyak's elbows in return as their minds interlocked in greeting for a brief moment.

So it was that two days later Ho Dyak and his mate, Sarn, climbed the chill slopes above the lowlands and came to the highlands. With them came two of the Outcasts, young hunters who wished to see the world above the fog sea.

Ho Dyak wore the space suit that he had cached far below in a rocky cliff's creviced wall, and Sarn and the two Outcasts wore as many and more garments than Ho Dyak had worn long days before.

As they came through the last shreds of the watery vapor that flooded the bowl of the Sea of Thol, one of the young Outcast warriors was in the lead. Suddenly he uttered a short, choked cry and fell, toppling back into the mist. And the rocks around them rattled with copper-tipped javelins.

"Quick!" shouted Ho Dyak. "It is the black-robed ones, the priests! They have been lying in wait for us!"

BACK INTO the welcome protection of the fog sea the Outcasts plunged, but now there were only three of them. For one thing was Ho Dyak grateful: the thinning network of *agan* afforded no

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safe footing for the hunting *drogs*.

"We die?" questioned Sarn quietly, and Ho Dyak laughed back at her. They were resting for a moment, listening.

"Not so long as my sword arms last," he said, "and of arms I have four."

"But they will follow us along the rim," objected Sarn. "When we climb upward again they will see us."

"They are cold and hungry," Ho Dyak told her, "and there are none too many of them. If we can reach the plateau safely we can fight them off, until we reach the rocket ship of the Earthman."

"We will be safe with the rocket rifle of Nelson to protect us," agreed Sarn.

Ho Dyak started along the thick stalks of *agan* again, his arms gripping the interlacing of rubbery greenish stems on his right. And behind him came Sarn and the young Outcast.

By nightfall they had moved a matter of two miles further along the left wall of the barrier cliffs. The lone moon of Thrane had not as yet lifted above the horizon and so they climbed silently upward into an almost complete darkness. Out of the fog sea they made their way, and safely into the dense jungle growth spreading at this point.

Sarn was chilled to the bone, and the young warrior's thick lips were blue with cold. The temperature of the lower plateau had dropped to almost a hundred degrees with the coming of dusk, ninety degrees below that of the lowlands. And so Ho Dyak followed a small stream, warmer than the usual upland streams, up to a rocky bluff where steaming water rolled white vapor into the growing moonlight of the jungle clearing. By some good fortune the hot spring gushed up in the heart of a small cavern and the two Outcasts were not forced to lie in the almost-boiling water.

With morning they marched eastward to the jungle meadow where the spaceship's shattered bulk lay. The spaceship was

empty. Ho Dyak saw that the helicopter was gone from the cargo hold, and with it many supplies. Nelson and the girl had thought he was not returning and gone in search of the ancient gateway that might pierce through to Earth!

Ho Dyak turned his eyes toward the mud-daubed hut of stones he had abandoned. His eyes widened at the sight of steam rising from its dome. Could they be—? No, it was impossible. Shattered though it was, the spaceship afforded better protection for Nelson and Marta than the igloo. Then who—?

Immediately, Ho Dyak knew the answer. The black-robed *orsts* had taken over the igloo! And they were not yet aware of the presence of the Outcasts.

He returned to the hidden Outcasts, his mate and the young warrior, but with him he carried a rocket rifle that Nelson had thoughtfully left behind.

"Come," he told the warrior, "we will drive the black-robed ones from our hut. With the Earthman's gun they will be helpless before us."

They marched side by side, two warriors from the fog sea, toward the rocky dome from which the plumes of white steam jetted. At last the priests saw them and came pouring from their warm shelter.

"Go back to the Place of Lalal," ordered Ho Dyak.

The black-robed, thick-padded bodies of the seven priestly fighting men shook with laughter. These two outcasts ordered them to retreat! They plunged ahead.

The rocket gun whirled and an explosion ripped two of the priest-warriors into tatters. Ho Dyak reloaded and fired, and a third warrior dropped. And then the tiny battery that fired the rocket shell went dead! The third rocket shell did not blast into the attacking men.

Ho Dyak flung down the useless weapon and drew his sword. Javelins could not pierce his space suit, only a sword could crush through to his body. His other hand was busy with his throwing stick and javelins, and he cursed the four limbs of the Earthmen that prevented his middle pair of arms from being used.

Four of the enemy faced the two of them at the last, and their weapons clash-

ed together. Ho Dyak fought with the strength of despair, and downed one of the black-robed ones, but then he was battling three swordsmen. The young Outcast had fallen.

Suddenly a shadow fell upon the fighting men from above. An explosion sounded and a priestly warrior fell, and then another. The sole survivor raced madly away toward the fog sea's welcome shelter and Ho Dyak was glad to let him escape. He would carry the word of the terrible weapons of Earth to the watchers along the rim.

The spaceship's helicopter settled slowly to the ground. Ho Dyak hurried toward the little ship's cabin and at the same time he saw Sarn come stumbling from the jungle toward them.

"Nick of time," grinned Nelson, and behind him Ho Dyak could see Marta Gosden's startled bloodless face.

"Right you are," Ho Dyak assured the Earthman. "And how did the search for a gateway to Earth go?"

"We're not worrying about that for the present," said Nelson. "You need us, Ho Dyak, and I think we need you too. We're staying here on Thrane for a long time."

"I am glad," Ho Dyak flashed. "In centuries to come all Thrane will bless you."

"That's so much jet dust," scoffed Nelson. "But we did find a canyon, several miles deep, Ho Dyak, a sort of fog lake, where you may be able to live normally, and above it, on the second plateau we found an ideal spot for our own home."

He squeezed Marta's shoulder as she slipped past him. Then he was beside her as she greeted Sarn. Ho Dyak smiled as he felt the friendly spirit that was instantly kindled between these women of two strange races.

"She is lovely!" cried Marta to Ho Dyak and Nelson, "and so miserable. Run to the ship, Glade, and bring another space suit."

Yes, thought Ho Dyak, with the knowledge of two races his ivory-skinned race might once again spread up over the fertile chill plateaus of Thrane. Already he loved the mighty vistas of clear air here above the fog sea. Never again would he be satisfied with the circumscribed grayness of a fog-bound world. . .

EXAMPLE

By TOM PACE

Malevolent death reared out of inky space before the hurtling liner. From it a frantic voice reached Commander Gray—"You know what to do!" He smiled grimly. Yes, he knew what to do . . .

THE FIFTH SECTOR COMMANDER was known as a rigid man, that was true; And yet no one could say exactly how rigid.

His office, aboard the *Polaris*, was a rather grim place. All command offices were, essentially, being limited pretty much to regulation furnishings, but rare was the Commander who did not manage to plant some of his personality there. It was perhaps characteristic of Commander Gray that there was only item in his office which

could be said to reveal anything about him.

He sat now behind the cubical steel desk and looked down at the glowing screen of the television set. The face in it was not at ease. Far from it.

Ordinarily, Jon Brullar, the Commissioner over Gray, was a self-important, unconsciously comical person. Now he looked neither comical nor important. He just looked very, very frightened.

He licked his trembling lips and said, in a voice hoarse with fear, "Of course

"That one cruiser, Commander, is more than a match for the entire Beolin fleet."



there is something you can do, Commander! After all," he brightened faintly, "there are important people on the *Stella*. Important people." He emphasized "important."

"I am aware of that, Commissioner Brullar," said the Commander. "Yet, what can I do?"

"You have authority!" sputtered Brullar. "And you know what you can *do*! Get through to Interstellar Command on Sirius VII and tell them just exactly what these Beolins are up to!" He glared, a fat man in mortal fear for his life. "And you can do it quickly, Commander! Quickly, do you understand?"

"I understand," the Commander said.

"Good." Brullar started to speak again, gulped, hesitated, and finally repeated, "Good." He switched off.

The Commander gazed reflectively down the catwalk, through the ship, at the faint glimmer of green outside of an open lock. There was a turbulence deep in his steel-colored eyes. He tapped a small stud with a slim, tapering forefinger.

Kina Staun came in.

Kina wasn't all Solarian. He had enough Sol blood in him to make him one in almost every respect, but there were differences, if you looked closely. He was the Commander's personal aide. There was actually more than that between them. The tremendousness of all the Commander governed—and which Kina helped him run—made for a rather involved relationship.

When people saw the Commander, they looked for Kina Staun. The two had not been a hundred yards apart since they had first met as newly-appointed official and aide. It was said that Kina knew every bit as much about the Fifth Sector and the Commander's work as the Commander knew himself.

For that reason, if Kina ever left his post, he would certainly die within an hour.

THE COMMANDER SAID, "Kina, call Hauns." The Secretary showed no surprise, but somehow managed to give that impression.

"The city of Hauns, capitol of Beolin III, the ruling planet of the Beolin system?" he asked very respectfully.

"Yes. I want to talk to their Commissioner-in-Chief. And also find the present location of the *Stella*."

"Yes, sir," said Kina.

He came back within ten seconds. "The *Stella*," he said, "is now at 3rd Quadrant 3521 NA, W-88236. Speed, one light-year per hour. Heading, 338 Degrees NA of nearest sun, Beolin. And I have Beolin Command for you.

The Commander touched a switch and the screen flicked on again. "Thank you, Kina," he said.

The face in the screen was definitely not human. Its structure, and even more, its expression was alien. It was distinctly unpleasant.

It belonged to Krraula, who was Commander-in-Chief, and the foremost murderer of the Beolin System. He smiled, a smile that was not a smile. He said, "Ah, Commander." And he saluted, sneering slightly.

The Commander said, "Greetings, Krraula. I would like to inquire the reason for your fleet being in its present position."

Krraula smiled again. "The fleet, Commander? Merely maneuvers," he said slyly. "Why do you ask?"

"There is a liner transiting through the outer fringes of your territory in—" he looked at a paper Kina had slipped before him "—about four hours. I would appreciate it if your fleet is withdrawn in time. It would not go well, Krraula, if an . . . accident . . . were to happen to this liner of which I speak. I think you understand."

He gave Krraula no time to answer, but switched off. He sat back, and looked aimlessly at Kina.

"Kina," he said, after a few moments of thought.

"Yes, Commander."

"Do you get the framework of this problem?"

"I do, sir," answered the aide.

"Good. Let me hear it."

"The question is one of Command," said Kina Staun quietly. "Out here in the stars, power—the authority to command—goes not to men's heads but to their souls. Krraula of Beolin is an example, and, in a different way—"

"Myself?"

"No, Commander. Brullar. He is the brass-hat type, while Krraula is simply a tyrannical madman."

"So far, you're right. But what of *this* particular problem?"

"Yes, sir," the aide said. "Krraula, and the Beolin rulers, have power in and about their system to the extent that their depredations go unchallenged there. And an apathetic Interstellar Command—"

"Does not act." finished the Commander. "You are entirely correct, Kina." He touched studs on the desk and reports slid through the viewer on the wall. He said quietly, "We have lost a score of ships—ships that we are sure the Beolins could tell us about. And yet the Command does not act." He looked reflectively at the slim, impassive man, and then spoke swiftly.

"Kina, I want you to get me two more connections . . . Sirius VII, and the Command Cruiser nearest to Beolin. Hurry! The cruiser first."

A MINUTE or so later, Kina slipped a sheet of paper onto the desk, and touched a switch. The screen glittered into life, showing the face of a man who wore a captain's shoulder bars. Glancing at the paper, which gave the name of the officer and the ship, the Commander said, "Captain Stang, how far are you from Beolin?"

"Roughly twenty light years, sir," was the immediate answer.

"Do you think that you can make a speed of—say—five light-years per hour, or perhaps more?"

The captain frowned slightly. "I'm not sure, Commander. Perhaps we can."

"Good! Stand by, at your present position in space." Gray switched off.

Kina spoke softly at his side. "That one cruiser, Commander, is more than a match for the entire Beolin fleet." He paused. "Here is your call to Sirius Headquarters, sir."

The Commander turned back to the screen. "Over-Commissioner Branu, are you aware of the present stage of relations with Beolin?"

The Over-Commissioner frowned at him. "Certainly! Why are you asking, Commander?" There was an imperious sharpness in his voice.

"What are they?"

PS's Feature Flash

The writer we select for honoring this month is not as well known to you, perhaps, as some others. In fact, no words of his have, to our knowledge, been published in P.S. at all. And yet, although his style is sure to strike you at first as dull, such is the power of his art that much of his work has been plagiarized—albeit unconsciously—by practically every writer contributing to STF mags today. It is a commentary on his character that such a thing could be done, without fear of legal action.

For he has curiously failed to place under copyright what is undoubtedly the greatest work in his whole career; it is available to all. It was as if he himself was awed by the scope, the profundity, the eternal greatness of this thing he had written and could not bear to nick its perfection by subjecting it to the usual marketing methods. As well as we know the man, however, we are inclined to think it simply did not occur to him to sell the piece in the ordinary way; it makes one almost breathe a sigh of relief to learn that he was rewarded at all. He was, and handsomely enough—by his own standards.

That which he wrote is of a curious nature. Physically, he *wrote* it—not painted, sculptured or composed it. But, as writing, it required no translation and yet, in time, was known the world over. But what universal language do we possess today, besides that of music?

To some it might seem more like a play than anything else. Certainly it can be said that, after its completion in 1905, a performance of this work was increasingly contemplated and the necessary financing, casting, and property-assembling begun. So monumental is the work, however, that forty years were spent in bringing the production to an appropriate state of polish; the war assuredly hastened this production, in more ways than one.

Finally, last year, three performances of this work were given—and the whole world ceased fighting to acknowledge its magnitude. Two more performances were scheduled for this year; one has just been given and another will probably have been run off by the time you read these words.

After all of course, it is *not* a play. Without attempting to be critical, we can say of it just these two things: It is the shortest work of its kind in the whole history of recorded literature. And it is the greatest statement of eternal truth since Descartes wrote, "*Cogito—ergo sum*" (I think—therefore I am).

The author of this work is Albert Einstein. The story he wrote, and which we reprint below in its entirety, is—

$$E=MC^2$$

(Energy equals mass multiplied by the square of the speed of light)

Branu hesitated, said, "Relations are somewhat strained at present, of course, but not seriously. I—"

"Suppose proof was given that Beolin was back of the recent disappearances of spacecraft?"

"My dear Commander Gray! You—you must not say that! Such an intimation might *easily* cost you your post! Why—"

The Commissioner cut him off.

"You see, Commander," said Kina, "the Command simply cannot think of such a thing."

"Yes . . . but they could be made—forced—to think of it."

"There is only one way to do *that*," said Kina. "Only one way."

"Yes," Commander Gray fell silent for a minute, and then said quietly, "Kina."

"I am listening, sir."

"The hands of one man," said the Commander, "were never meant to hold personal power such as this. We can do only the best we can . . . and it will never be perfect. We must be prepared to—" he hesitated slightly before going on "—to set aside all personal things, and substitute the stars for them. Because only in that way can we approach perfection."

Kina was silent and attentive, but his eyes flickered for a second across the one personal item in the office.

"I am not a god, Kina. And yet I must be. Because there are men—such as Krraula—who think they are." He fell silent.

Then he said, "A god *must* have power of life . . . and death."

The screen was on again and, once more, it was Commissioner Brullar. He was almost frantic.

"Commander Gray! Have you acted yet? The captain says that we are being screened out. Only this special set can get through—and only to you!" He gulped, mopping at his forehead. "Commander, I have my entire family aboard this ship! I—I know that you . . ." His voice faltered for an instant. "Can't *you* get through to the Command?"

Then, nervously, without waiting for a reply, he plunged on. "The Captain of the *Stella* says he believes there is an Interstellar Command cruiser within four hours or so. Can't you get it here? It could escort us through the edge of the Beolin

system in safety! Commander Gray, I in—"

The Commander cut Brullar off.

"Kina," he asked, "what do you think the effect of a Beolin massacre would be on the Command?"

"Roughly estimating, Commander, considerably more than the effect of an unleashed power beam on inert matter."

"Yes," said the Commander. "Yes. Kina, at least ten thousand human lives have been lost on ships that I *know* have been captured by the Beolins. Unless the Command takes action—now—there will never be a check on Krraula and his successors. And only a shocking catastrophe would stir up the Sirius Command Headquarter. A certain kind of catastrophe."

"The sacrifice justifies itself," said Kina Staun. "The moral laws, the very framework of civilization itself, is now of a shape incredible to the person of two or three hundred years ago."

"My orders, then, should be . . . ?"

Kina stood up, stiffly. "It would be presumptuous of me, Commander."

The silence did not last very long.

At last the Commander said, "Kina, order Captain Stang to resume his usual patrol activities. Arrange to follow the *Stella* with a long-range recording beam. Prepare for the Interstellar Command's order . . . to proceed with a punitive expedition against the Beolin system." He looked long down the catwalk, and his fingers slowly closed about the one personal touch to his office.

His voice was very low. "No more messages are to be received from the *Stella*."

And he opened his hand.

LATER, after the Commander had gone down the catwalk to walk about for a while on the soft, Earthlike greenness of this world's vegetation, Kina bent to pick up that which had fallen to the floor.

It was a color photograph, and the cold plastic sheen of the film somehow managed to convey the impression of the blonde, young woman's soft, warm loveliness.

It was inscribed, "*With all my love, John. Myra.*" Kina had often seen Commissioner Brullar's daughter.

He dropped the photograph in to a disposal chute, and turned to some papers that had to be filed.

SAVAGE GALAHAD

By BRYCE WALTON



This was his last battle. His instinct told him that.

Tons of sinuous muscle, buried in fetid Venusian slime, he knew how to survive. Equipped with an ageless brain and lightning instincts, he also knew how to die!

HE STIRRED SLIGHTLY, the ponderously long, yet smoothly flowing lines of his body, trembling vaguely with the undulating rhythm of the tall pale watergrass. Dim and monstrous shadows floated past, then suddenly spurted in frenzied speed to devour or be devoured. And the dark blue tint of the

swamp water browned in wavering veins of blood.

An alien organism had come to his world. Its strange radiations pierced his brain in waves of bizarre beauty. Its uniqueness was disturbing the long sleep he was enjoying in the warm soft slime. A being from a far world, which he read symbolized in her confused mind as EARTH. And facing certain death, she was utterly disoriented with terror.

She reacted mentally to his world. The name she applied to it was Venus, Planet of the Morning and that was beauty of expression. She was beauty and so were her thoughts; her world must have been of that nature, too. His world had no beauty anywhere in it; beauty would be alien here, yet he was tired of ugliness.

His massive brain circuit contacted hers in its subtle supersonic way, knowing everything she had known or could know, thinking as she thought, reacting as she reacted far above him where she wandered alone along the vaporous fringe of his swamp. And he suddenly realized how alien she really was, for here on his world she was like a bubble floating beneath the surface of his lake, on the edge of countless dangers, confronted by a thousand deaths, but completely unaware of their nearness or exact nature. This was not her world. It would never be a world for her species. And abruptly he wanted to see her, touch her. Touch this beautiful bubble before it burst. For he had never known beauty before, and he was hungry for it.

One giant flipper moved softly, and the ponderously sleek form, long and pointed and glistening through the water, lanced upward, streaking the depths in a silent blurring arc.

HE STUDIED HER with curious and new emotions through the thick, heavy-hanging mists, his long serpentine form curled out along the global swamp, undulating between the spongy swaying trunks of two bulbous trees, half-buried in the thick iridescent mud, and effectively hidden from her alien eyes by interlocking crinoids and gigantic towering ferns.

Monstrous insects droned broodingly through the sultry vapors and ventured to light on his gleaming hide. A quick twitch

of long steely tendons blotted them out in lightning grips. But his thickly lidded eyes remained fixed on the girl who had come from Earth.

He was not disappointed in her beauty of form. It had a soft, rhythmic smoothly-flowing curvature. It seemed to him a perfect aesthetic creation of its kind. The contrast, too, impressed him—her frail, delicate form treading so fearfully among gigantic flora and fauna of endless varieties, each vying with the others in size and ferocity. Because of this contrast she seemed more beautiful here, perhaps, than she might on her own world. But she should not be here; she would find only death here. She did not understand this world, and she never would.

He felt the pangs of an emotion utterly strange to him. He plunged the supersonic fingers of his brain deeply into hers and found an expression there that would vaguely define that emotion. LOVE. It was an abstract symbol that on her own world meant the crystallization of celestial ideals.

And that is what I must feel for this alien creature, he mused. LOVE.

The many other emotions that accompanied the symbol, LOVE, on her world—hate, jealousy, hope, ambition, despair, courage—these did not enter his massive neural circuits. She felt this great emotion for another being somewhat like her, very close by. This other being, he examined only briefly for he was ugly, a frantic figure pacing nervously in something they both knew as a SHIP that rested not far away in the swamp. She had wandered away from the SHIP and could not find her way back to it through the mists. And this other organism—MAN—was being driven into complete disintegration with anxiety and fear for her.

But he knew that the man would never find her. There was no jealousy or hate or envy as he curled through the swamp, watching her. That would spoil the beauty of this moment. She would be destroyed soon; other emotions must not distract from the few moments he had in which to absorb this aesthetic thrill of her movements.

Gruoon! The symbol was etched in his mind as a blob of dark dread. His body tensed into rippling steel. The *Gruoon* was

dropping down through the mist; his brain could follow every flapping motion of its great leathery shape as it dropped in a straight driving plunge directly for the girl.

His triple-lidded eyes could not see it, but that was not necessary; because of his supersonic brain, he was a ruler of this swamp world, and that was why he would survive the dull grey aeons that stretched ahead. So long as his supersonic brain guided his actions he would rule.

He tensed, arched high in taut waiting, while the *Gruoon* plummeted down in a sighing blur of speed.

Now he could sense the *Gruoon's* naked, yellow-scaled claws outstretched, its toothed beak yawing, and its red-disked eyes shining with that insatiable blood-thirst that was the scourge of this world. The scourge of all but himself.

He tensed the full length of his mighty corded body, his twelve flippers digging into the glowing mud, his gigantic corded tail curled in feral silence around into a taut S that could spring outward in a blinding explosion of power.

She was experiencing great fear, but still not as much as she should. This surprised him. Now that he knew how completely helpless and alien she was on this world of his, how frail and delicate she was, and how she belonged on a much different sphere than this one. She had no conception that the *Gruoon* was even now falling down upon her like a comet. That those poisonous claws would wrap about her creamy body and rip her to shreds and carry her away into the smoking peaks.

She was ignorant of all the countless dangers surrounding her. Fifty *kimm* away, hardly more than the length of his own body, was the SHIP which she was trying to find. But she had not the dimmest concept of where it was. Such appalling lack of basically protective intuition was incomprehensible to him.

She knew nothing of the *Vreed*, and its painless bite which bloated a living organism rapidly until it burst. And the venomous stinging of the *Kristons* that paralyzed to a slow unmoving death. Or the semi-organic *Trumask* tree that waited for her approach even now, immobile, without any visible sign to its victims that

its crimson appendages could suddenly whip into action to trap them, dragging them into its trunk that opened to reveal a slightly pulsating cavern full of half-devoured forms. These were only a few of an endless horde of huge and hideous things, yet she suspected none of the things waiting in the mists. She could only believe what she saw through her beautiful eyes. And the mist was thick.

Suddenly the taut S of his body unleashed itself, whipping straight upward in an unbending line. His sharp snout speared up through the swirling vapor until he was balanced momentarily on the tip of his stiffened tail. Then, at the apex of his spring, his three-jawed mouth unhinged, gaped and crunched shut on the *Gruoon*. The vapor was whipped into fretful whirls. The girl sank down, her eyes searching upward, but blindly through the gloom.

He sank down once more on his scaled belly, wriggled deeper in the mud. He dropped the mangled leathery blob that had been a *Gruoon*. Then he turned his eyes once more on the bit of strange beauty which he had preserved a little while longer for his aesthetic pleasure.

HER EYES kept searching above her. Now the dread silence that had followed, for an instant, after the piercing shriek of the dying *Gruoon*, seemed to affect her more than the sound had. She shook her head, her eyes lowering to look apprehensively about her, then back to the thick greyness above. She turned indecisively in several directions, took a few steps in one direction, then hesitated, turned in another; then abruptly and hysterically changed her previous course entirely, and was running directly toward him.

Yes, she was completely lost, and that was indeed a strange weakness in an organism. Only fifty *kimm* away was the intricate machinery that had brought her here, and which sheltered more of her kind, including her lover whom she ached to see again. Incredible.

And this SHIP mechanism full of her kind, aliens, were intending to remain here on his world! It was an amazing paradox. They intended to rely for their survival on a number of synthetic defense methods, constructed from basic elements

and powered by various energy principles. This girl had just unsheathed such a device for her own protection—just now, long after the *Gruoon* had attacked and died! If she had any inborn protective instincts at all, they were so weakened from lack of use or by heredity that only now had they gotten around to warning her.

And these beings had mechanical detectors based somewhat on his organic equipment. But they were utterly inadequate to meet the predatory ferocity of his world. Why had these irrational creatures ventured from their own comparatively safe world to this? If they actually intended to remain, their chances of survival depended on almost immediate adaptation. But that would be impossible, of course.

He watched her with a lonely and hungry eagerness. She had slowed her pace to a walk and had already begun edging unwittingly to the right in what would prove to be a long erratic circle leading away from the *SHIP*. But she would not go far, even on the wrong course. She was walking headlong and blindly into the silently waiting arms of the bloated, motionless *Trumask*.

He waited, too, watching her. Somehow she seemed more a thing of beauty as she approached death. Death lent a sadness that added to her beauty a kind of poignancy. His eyes half-lidded dreamily as the full softness of the emotion flowed through him.

The synthetic defensive mechanism was held out in front of her as she edged along. She was beautiful as she moved. And on this world of his, no warmth or softness of her kind could exist. It would die. On his world the only living thing that remotely suggested this girl from another planet to his hungry mind was the delicate soft petal of the *Minon* blossom. But on close inspection of the unwary or forgetful, even this spit out a deadly white venom.

He slid his long writhing length, slithering soundlessly between the *Trumask* and the girl.

HER DEEPLY BURIED INSTINCT functioned better this time, but not nearly quickly enough. Not for this environment. She paused, her head jerking

from side to side, the weapon in her hand clutched tightly and swinging with the direction of her head. But her eyes swept unsuspectingly past the *Trumask*. Seemingly, on her world, only organisms promised real danger.

A strange world, that—a soft, slow-turning world of dream more than reality; of hope rather than realization; of delusion taking the place of struggle.

Slime strung down from the tentacles of the *Trumask* as they writhed toward her in undulating evil shudders. The trunk gaped open.

All of the girl's reactions went through his brain, and he was amazed by their pointless complexity. A thousand fragments jostled each other in her mind. Memories of the past, forgotten mistakes, hopes for the future with no regard for probability, visions of the lover who waited in the *SHIP*. All these and many more, equally irrelevant to this dire situation. She should be concentrating on one thing—escape. Yet she was not moving. She was in a kind of paralysis he could not understand.

Now, *now*, she was acting, but, as usual, far too late. She was trying to employ the weapon. But one of the bloated red tentacles flipped it from her hand. She sagged down, her mouth mumbling incoherent symbols. She dropped on her knees in the oozing scum, digging down frantically in a sobbing attempt to find the weapon; but three of the viscous tentacles encircled her. They dragged her toward the maw of the trunk that now gaped to its full, cavernous capacity. Her terrified eyes could see an unrecognizable amorphous shape still struggling weakly down in that pulsating well.

He acted as lightning strikes, instinctively. Later he would know why. In his world thought had to follow action. His huge jaws closed on a number of the thick tentacles, severed them. They whipped free of the girl, jerking and contorting, slashing the murky vapor in aimless death patterns. The girl somehow had staggered out of reach of the remaining ones.

He dropped down again, out of sight, writhing away to bury himself again in mud and fog. He searched her mind. Had she seen him? She must have. Strange

that he could find no reaction. There seemed to be a kind of shock. She had seen him. Then some mental defense mechanism had blinded her memory to him. Did she find him ugly? Why? Should not he be possessed of some kind of beauty, also? He had within him the capacity to appreciate beauty. At least she should be sympathetic and grateful and kind to him if she knew he was saving her from death, and pain. Yet—her mind would not accept him. She had seen him briefly, then forgotten.

Her terror and nervous disintegration was acute now. He could save her from physical dangers, but he could not protect this soft strange mind and nervous system from breaking apart and losing its balance of function.

Yet her beauty still remained, and that was his chief interest. The fluid motion, contour, symmetry and rhythm remained as before; was the justification for her continued existence in his eyes.

Her motions did not follow her mental direction at all now. She reached her hands out as though trying to part thick mist like a solid web. She groped about in small circles. Then she stopped, her eyes parted wide, and she screamed. Through the holocaust of sound—the cries, bellows, and screeches and hisses of the swamp—her scream was almost soundless. Yet its mental significance cut into his great brain like a wound.

Torrq!

The scream's effect had detracted even his wondrous instinctive mechanism for an instant. During that second the *Torrq* heaved itself up almost beneath her. Something slithered through his brain, rippling down his long curved length—the closest emotion to fear his nervous system could approach. He hesitated, flinching away.

He knew what to do. Why then, did he hesitate before the *Torrq*?

The girl stood stiff with terror, mindless, muscles drawn tight, nerves twitching.

He hesitated. He had about gained the maximum from her beauty. It was a passing thing. He could not possibly go on appreciating it much longer; she was a limited art form. And the *Torrq*—even he was apprehensive of that one. Even he had

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never challenged the ferocious deadliness of the giant *Torrq*. It was a mighty, mindless machine of destruction, and so difficult to kill. Its thick leathery body, slick with green scum, was almost impossible to pierce, and any one of its twenty writhing arms was a pounding, sucking, smashing bludgeon of power. He had five *amphos* to live . . . but if he tried to keep the *Torrq* from this alien creature . . .

HE SEARCHED her mind, as the *Torrq* raised up higher and higher from the thick nest of its pool. Vaguely, beneath her terror-stricken mind, he saw the symbol SQUID, enlarged many times. Its great green-colored caudal fins swayed

impatiently, fanning huge swirling spirals of vapor, like smoke, throwing drops of swamp weed and mud until the groveling girl's beauty was almost buried in the steaming stench.

Why had she reacted so adversely to that brief sight of him? Why was he so uncertain about his course of action? If he had a form suitable for her eyes, if he could look forward to having her always to watch its perfect rhythm of movement; if he were only assured of her beauty going on forever, flowering for his pleasure in this world of teeming ugliness, if—

The *Torrg* acted almost too quickly for his reaction. But that unexpectedness of the *Torrg's* move decided him. His instinct guided him again, guided him in a blinding streaking flash of sheer power.

He took the muddy squirming figure of the girl between his unhinged jaws, delicately, but firmly. He accomplished this in an incomparable burst of energy, continuing on through the finish of the move without a stop. His body shot beneath the whipping tentacles of the *Torrg*, toward the SHIP that waited helplessly for her return.

He felt the *Torrg's* suckers close on his back as he passed. There was no pausing to understand why he was exposing himself to certain defeat. One must get in the initial blow in his world, or lose. His instinct was guiding him. It had never yet failed him. Later, if he survived, he could reason out the problem.

He sat the girl down gently, an inert lump just beneath the bow of the SHIP. Then he twisted around to try and rake the *Torrg* from his back. He had put himself wholly into the mad mindless power of the *Torrg's* blood-thirst. He kept trying to turn, but it seemed too late for that. He felt its twenty arms wrap about his throat and belly and flippers. Its monstrous weight crawled up his back. Two more of its appendages clinched about his jaws—his only means of destruction.

He coiled and uncoiled, unleashing the full force of his great power. His body twisted, jerked over and over in lightning-fast, explosive arcs. Simultaneously he rolled in the direction of his swamp lake, at the bottom which he had lived for all his lonely life.

Disengaged appendages of the *Torrg* swung and slapped thunderously against the swamp surface. Then the two were sliding down through the thick black depths of his swamp lake.

In the tepid bubbling water their individual differences were largely canceled. Here they could battle to the ultimate decision.

They sank down through the murky, swirling deeps, and he was curling and snapping his fifty *kimm* until the entire expanse of his swamp lake churned and frothed, surging and boiling as though a steam fissure had blown open beneath it. Dead things floated up past them toward the surface and were promptly devoured by serpentine things.

This was his last battle. His instinct told him that. Somehow, though, his instinct had failed him this time. Taking the girl back to her SHIP had been an error of instinct. He would never know why he had done it, because he would not have time to study the psychology of it.

He felt the great holes being ripped in his belly where his flippers had been torn out. He felt his thick cold blood streaming out in rivers, thickening the swamp lake. He noted the darting lusting hunger of the intent school of killer snakes that were already swimming into the current of that blood, following up the direction of the final feeding.

This knowledge drove him to the great effort that partially dislodged the appendages from about his jaws. His long sharp head speared around, closed about that part of the *Torrg* from which its many eyes stared cold and lidless.

They settled together that way into the crawling mud of the lake bottom. The *Torrg's* death threshings, the final contracting of its arms, crushed him, squashing his insides out into the thirsting water. His jaws were locked about the *Torrg* in a grip even death could not undo . . .

Until weakness drove the last spark of reason from his great supersonic circuit he was reflecting on the psychology of it, of why his instinct had proven false. Glimmerings of the cause appeared, but then the ancient brain that had survived so many countless *amphas* abruptly ceased to exist.

Breath Of Beelzebub

By LARRY STERNIG



Not for a million credits would I walk out on a party like this!

All that had been distilled from the curious vegetation of the doomed planetoid was half an ounce, a mere tingleful of blue liquor. But it was enough to drive a universe mad.

THE MARTIAN SERVANT stopped at my desk, coughed faintly to attract my attention. I looked up and he handed me a calling card on which was printed "Slane O'Graeme." It was a limp,

thumb-marked and discouraged-looking emissary.

"E wishes to see Mr. Ames," the wedge-faced servant told me. The high disdain in his tone of voice revealed more

clearly than words his opinion of the visitor.

I shrugged and dropped the card on my desk. "Oh, well, send him in. I'll give him the brush-off."

The Martian faded away and I turned back to the 1999 capitulation figures Mr. Ames wanted. I forgot about Slane O'Graeme, whoever he was, until a timid "hello" made me look up from the reports.

"You're Mr. Fleming Ames?" he asked diffidently.

He was an odd-looking little guy with a head like an oversize cue-ball and a narrow fringe of fuzzy graying hair that looked like a misguided halo. He wore green-tinted contact lenses that made his eyes seem unusually large and bright.

"No, I'm not Fleming Ames," I told him. "I'm Bill Dineen, Mr. Ames' confidential secretary. What can I do for you?"

"Uh—Mr. Ames is president of Universal Liquors, Incorporated, isn't he?"

I nodded.

"I have something I'd like to show him, Mr. Dineen. It's something new. I found it on Planetoid Y-145."

I stared at him almost incredulously. He didn't look like a spaceman.

"You mean a kind of drink? But I didn't think any of the planetoids were inhabited. How did you—"

"It isn't a drink exactly, Mr. Dineen. And Planetoid Y-145 isn't inhabited—in fact, there isn't any Planetoid Y-145 any more. A meteor hit it last week, I read in the astrology reports. Busted it to smithereens."

He reached in his pocket and held up a little transpariplast vial, which held about half an ounce of a murky blue fluid.

"So this is all there is anywhere, as far as I know," he revealed. "It's the juice of a kind of lichen that grew on the planetoid. I stopped there last month looking for minerals, and I took some of the lichen along just to see what it was. I didn't know then. I distilled this on the way back and threw out the lichen, so this is all—"

"—there is," I finished for him, a bit impatiently. "But what is it? And if there isn't any more, what good can it do us?"

"Your laboratories can synthesize things, can't they? Yes, I know it's an expensive process, but this stuff is very con-

centrated and a little goes a long way. So, even if it did cost quite a bit to make, just think of the—"

"But get to the point, Mr. O'Graeme. What is it?"

"Uh—I've named it 'Breath of Beelzebub'. You put a drop of it in water, and—oh, boy! You don't even drink the water. The gas works through your skin. Osmosis, or something. I found it out accidentally."

I FROWNED at him. "What do you mean 'Oh, boy!'? If you've read anything about our policies, you know that we discourage the use of strong intoxicants. Ever since the Martian uprising ten years ago, we've been promoting beers, ales and Venusian klorah, and weaning drinks away from anything stronger. What effect does this have?"

O'Graeme took the stopper out of the vial and set it carefully upright on my desk.

"It works without water, too," he said. "But it's less efficient this way. One drop in water is more potent than a whole vial plain. Feel it?"

I did, before he even finished speaking. My hands were resting on the desk and it began there, and worked its way up my arms—a warm throbbing glow of sensation that was unlike anything I'd ever felt before. Must have gone right through clothing, for it reached my shoulders and started up my neck and down my body from there.

It was a mildly pleasant tingling—until it reached my head. Then suddenly I realized that it was more than pleasant. It was—well, it just wasn't like anything I'd ever felt before. A feeling of utter happiness is the nearest I can come to describing it, although it was only partly that.

I knew that I hadn't a care in the system worth worrying about. I knew that it didn't matter the least bit whether or not I got those figures co-ordinated for Mr. Ames. If he fired me for not doing them, so what? Wasn't I going to marry his daughter—Margie Amelita Ames? You can bet your last rocket charge I was, and if he or that fat, snooty, dictatorial wife of his objected, I'd just tell them to—

O'Graeme with the bulging green eyes,

picked up the vial and carefully replaced the stopper. He was smiling. He started to say, "Well, what do you—"

I stood up, and leaned forward across the desk. "Slane, ol' bosom pal of mine," I said, "You've *got* something there. Listen, why let a stuffed shirt like Fleming Ames in on it? I'll handle it for you. I'll make us *millions*."

Slane O'Graeme looked at me and frowned a little. "Ummm," he said skeptically. "I'm sure you mean well, Mr. Dineen, but hadn't you better wait until you get over feeling—"

"Feeling what?" I demanded. "I assure you, palsy, that I'm not in the slightest upset—"

"Have you a laboratory, like Mr. Ames'? Can you synthesize—"

I waved a hand airily. "Laboratory? Don't need one for something simple as that. I studied chemistry in high school, and I assure you, pal, that I can quite easily—"

O'Graeme shook his head slowly. "I've tried this stuff often, Mr. Dineen, and I'm used to it, but I see that you—Perhaps I'd better come back tomorrow evening instead of—"

"And lose a whole day?" I scoffed. "Why, we'll be rich by then. Come on, palsy. Let's go back and join Fleming Ames' dinner party. I want you to meet Margie Ames. The old folks don't know it yet, but Margie and I are engaged. Besides," I added with a sly grin, winking at him, "there is a tank full of mermaids back there that'll knock your eyes out. It cost a fortune to have them brought in from Mercury."

I took O'Graeme by the arm and propelled him out into the long corridor. The polaroid glass walls of the huge building looked down upon the great City of Mars with its network of shuttle-car tubes, the 'copter landings and— We passed a section of wall that opened onto the sky parkway and a draft of cold fresh air hit me. I stopped suddenly.

"Whew!" I said, closing my eyes and then opening them again slowly. "Say, I've been talking like a— Will you please forget everything I've said?"

The little guy grinned. "I discounted it. I've been there myself. The first time I tried it—on my way back to Mars—I put



three drops in *water*, and I radioed on ahead to tell them that I was buying the whole fleet of Interplanetary, and to get me an option on—"

"Listen," I cut in soberly. "I *will* take you back to Mr. Ames, though, dinner party or not. Unless he objects because it's too potent, I'm sure he'll be interested if we demonstrate. What's a safe dose—nothing like the one I just had?"

"One drop, if it's a large room. Mild exhilaration and release from care. You had about the equivalent of two drops in water; delusions of grandeur, if you'll pardon my—"

"Sure," I grinned. We'd been walking and were almost back to the big drawing-room where Fleming Ames would be entertaining his dinner guests. "What happens if you use—not that I'm suggesting it—four or five drops?"

"Partial dissociation of personality, and with six or seven drops, you might find yourself in the body of whoever happens to be in the room with—" His voice trailed off absently and his green-tinted eyes actually popped as we stepped through the doorway.

He gulped. "You—you really *meant* that about—"

"The mermaids?" I laughed as he fumbled in his pocket and brought out the vial to make sure the stopper was on tight. "Sure. You needn't have discounted *that*, my friend!"

I LED HIM to the glowing, plexiglas tank in the center of the room. It was a drum-like affair, about five feet high and eight in diameter; complete with bright green sea weed and a glittering red cave-like shelter of Mercurian coral.

But that wasn't what we were looking at, nor the dozens of goldfish that swam merrily about the coral and bumped their snouts against the plexiglass sides of the tank. It was the ten tiny mermaids that

crowded around the coral base, wiggling gracefully toward us one by one to stare at us staring at them.

They were much like the fabled marine creatures I'd read about on Earth, only smaller—like little dolls—and far more beautiful than those imaginative ancients ever dreamed of.

From the waist up they were pocket- editions of perfectly-formed girls. Their eyes were amber, with the sparkle of a coquette, their hair luxuriantly long and golden. Silver nails tipped each tiny finger and the silver was repeated in the gleaming scales which covered the tapering lower half of the graceful bodies.

O'Graeme peered in delighted fascination at the strange sight. "Fantastic!" he breathed.

"Stupendous!" I corrected. "Aren't they honeys?"

Just then the dinner party filed in from the adjoining room. I caught Mr. Ames' eye, and he gave me the nod. So I introduced Slane O'Graeme. Besides Mr. Ames and his wife and Margie, there were three guests, Roger Wescott, Interplanetary Transport magnate, and his wife, and Senator B. Peerpont Weems.

Fleming Ames turned the little vial over in his hands and examined it frowningly. "You say, Bill, that the effect is a mild and pleasant exhilaration?"

I smiled. "Well, Mr. Ames, it was more than mild, but then I got an overdose, I suppose. There was no physical incoordination, though. Just mental stimulus. I had a momentary inclination to—" I paused—it didn't seem wise to tell my employer just what that momentary inclination had been.

Mr. Ames carefully uncorked the vial. "Well," he said, "I guess, if you've tried it and found it safe we'll give it a group test. Try it as an after-dinner cordial. Anyone mind?"

He glanced about the huge air-cushioned divans and lounging chairs where the guests were comfortably settled. Both Mr. Wescott and Senator Weems nodded approvingly.

Mrs. Ames stiffened in her overstuffed chair and said a bit tensely, "Fleming, I simply will not tolerate—" But Margie put a hand on her mother's arm and said, "Now, Mother, don't be a spoilsport. I'm

sure Bill wouldn't let Dad try it if it wasn't all right."

I smiled at Margie gratefully.

Then Mr. Ames turned toward the mermaid tank behind him, and Slane O'Graeme said quickly, "Be careful, Mr. Ames. Don't drop—"

And then it happened.

THE OPENED VIAL slipped from the liquor magnate's hand as he lifted it over the rim on the tank. It hit the top of the water with a soft plop, sank and struck the coral with a faint clink. Diffusion in the water must have been almost instantaneous; it was light blue throughout even before the vial hit bottom.

I heard a low exclamation from O'Graeme, and then he yelped excitedly, "Quick, everyone, get out of—" His voice trailed off there and a beatific expression came over his face. I was only a bit farther from the tank than he, and it hit me almost at the same time.

It was the same sensation I had experienced in my office. Not much stronger, but far more sudden and complete.

My eyes were still on the mermaid tank, and I thought for an instant that it was empty, that the mermaids and goldfish had mysteriously vanished into nothingness. Then a pair of golden streaks, faintly visible, followed by the flash of a mermaid's body, showed me my error.

Suddenly it came to me: This was the time to tell Mrs. Ames about wanting to marry Margie. Now! Tell her, and tell her to go to Jupiter if she didn't like it.

I whirled around, and paused aghast. Mrs. Ames was slumped down in her chair, and her eyes were vacuous. Her mouth was wide open and her fat arms were making wriggling motions as though her hands were flippers and she was trying to swim. She looked like a fish out of water—certainly *not* like a mermaid.

Slowly, I turned back to O'Graeme. I grabbed his arm and he looked up, obviously startled. "Listen," I said. "What did you say an overdose of this Breath of Beelzebub would do?"

His popping green eyes opened wide. "Why, darling," he said, "how should I know? And how did I get over here?"

I sort of swayed on my feet and closed my eyes. I was looking down at a bald-

headed little man, and hearing Slane O'Graeme's voice, but—but—

It couldn't be! I opened my eyes and looked across the tank at Margie Ames. My Margie. Her beautiful blue eyes were wide with astonishment and she was staring down at her own arms and hands in the blankest sort of bewilderment. Then she looked up and caught my eye and said, "Mr. Dineen, what the devil— Didn't I tell you that six or seven drops would—"

I shook my head and closed my eyes again. And something seemed to slip. I didn't open them, but they were open just the same, and all I was seeing was a blur of motion and I seemed to be going in circles through something wet and blue. I got dizzy and tried to close my eyes again, but they wouldn't close. But I did manage to stop moving—and I shuddered, and the shudder wasn't because the water in the tank was cold.

A beautiful young woman, with long flowing hair of gold, swam by. But she didn't have any clothes on and where her legs should have been there was the tail of a fish. I thought suddenly here was my chance to kiss a mermaid, but she flung some sea weed in my face and ducked into what looked like a cave.

I tried to look out of the tank, but everything was distorted and I couldn't make out much. I could hear sounds as though several people were talking at once, but the sounds, too, were distorted and I couldn't make out what was being said.

I tried to groan and found I couldn't do that, either. And that made me, strangely, want to giggle. And, oddly enough, I *was* giggling.

Then someone was saying, "*Stop that!*" and shaking my shoulder and it didn't seem to be wet and cold any more. My shoulder was bare, and the hand hurt and I looked up, and suddenly a nursery song of long ago that I'd heard in my childhood came back to me and I started to sing, "I fwam and I fwam right over the—" until the shock of hearing my voice come out a rich throaty contralto made me stop and bring my eyes into focus.

And I was looking up at myself leaning over me, and the other I was saying in my voice, "Listen, I'm Margie Ames, and I'm curious to know who is in my body."

"I'm Bill," I said. "What in the—"



"Bill!" she cut in. "Where *were* you? This Mr. O'Graeme (he's over in Senator Weems right now) was explaining what happened and we took a roll-call and you weren't around."

I closed my eyes (or Margie's eyes) again. I should have had it by then, but I was still confused. Coming down the hallway, O'Graeme had told me that four or five drops of the fluid, in water, would cause "partial dissociation of personality." More than that would make it complete. And Mr. Ames had dropped the whole vial into the mermaid tank!

"It's temporary," Margie said. "We change around every few minutes or so and it'll all come out right when the stuff wears off, but—"

I was looking down at my—temporary—shapely arms and bare shoulders, and I started to chuckle. Suddenly—possibly it was the realization that whatever was happening was temporary—I began to see the humor of the situation. It isn't funny unexpectedly to find oneself in the body of a goldfish. But it *had* been a rare experience—and I'd almost kissed a mermaid!

I said, "This is a beautiful dress we have on, Margie."

SHE BLUSHED and stamped her big foot on my dainty little open-toed slipper. "Bill!" she wailed. "How could you? *You* of all people! It isn't decent! It—it's—"

And then the funny side of it struck her too, and we were both laughing like a couple of lunatics. I saw she was waving my arms around in glee. I sobered up a moment, and warned, "Be careful of that watch-candid on your—my—wrist. It set me back a hundred credits."

I stood up and looked around. And my scope of interest widened as I found my-

self in the center of a lot of confusion.

Roger Wescott, the Interplanetary Transport magnate, was chasing his mouse-like wife around the mermaid tank. She ran past me with a frightened look on her face and I grabbed Wescott's arm.

"Look, Wescott," I said. "Isn't that a bit—"

He grinned at me. "That's Mrs. Ames, and she's down to the size now where I can give her the spanking I've always wanted—" He jerked and I let go his arm. If anyone wanted to spank Mrs. Ames while the spanking was good, he had my blessing.

When they came around again, I yelled, "But who are you?"

He winked and didn't answer and that was enough of a tip-off. There are times when a confidential secretary shouldn't even pretend to recognize his boss.

I turned back to see if I was still standing beside myself, and I was, so I said, "Listen, Margie—"

My voice interrupted, "Margie? I thought you were Miss Ames. I'm O'-Graeme. I was going to say—"

I grabbed myself by the lapels. "See here, O'-Graeme," I said. "Are you *sure* this is all right? I mean, everybody seems to be having lots of fun, but what if we get stuck this way? And, listen, can't everyone just walk out of range of that stuff? It must affect only a given area."

He grinned my best grin. "I suggested it. But nobody *wants* to. Do you?"

I hadn't thought about it before, but I didn't. I looked across to where Mr. Ames was lying on the floor trying to make like a mermaid, and then I glanced at the tank and wondered who was in there, for nine little mermaids were trying to get away from the tenth one!

And I began to howl with laughter. No, not for a million credits would I want to walk out on a party like this. Even if it cost me my job, and I was beginning to have a hunch it would.

Then I had an idea that it might be fun to stir the water in the mermaid tank and see what—I started toward it and nearly fell over a chair. The chair hadn't been there before and I saw I was facing in the opposite direction than the one I'd started out, so I muttered, "What the—" and

looked down and recognized my own suit, my own hands, and my own watch-candid on my wrist.

I was back home!

Just me, or everyone? No, Mr. Ames was still trying to wiggle his way across the floor, and at one end of the divan Mrs. Ames was smoking a big black Venusian cigar.

Senator B. Peerpont Weems—or was it?—banged me on the shoulder and said, "Some fun, huh? Nobody knows who's who, so nobody can—" He glanced across my shoulder and grinned and started to move past me. I looked back and saw Margie's cute little French maid coming in from the dining room. Her eyes were wide with amazement—and then I saw her face go blank for a moment. So she'd gone under, too!

I grabbed the senator's arm—or was it the senator?—as he tried to pass me, and warned, "Hey, none of that. What if it's Mrs. Ames?" and he shuddered, and started the other way.

Mr. Ames was starting to get up from the floor. I saw him gazing down at himself with blank bewilderment, and then he looked across at me. "What ees thees?" he asked.

I grinned and turned to O'-Graeme—I think it was O'-Graeme. "A newcomer in our midst," I said, jerking a thumb toward Mr. Ames. "Better explain things to her before she takes her turn in the tank, or she's in for a worse shock."

I didn't want to bother with explanations myself, because I'd just remembered my watch-candid. It could take fifty pictures without reloading, and I had a reload in my pocket, if I stayed inside my own coat long enough to use it. It was a Undex B-29, the kind that can photograph the inside of your hat by starlight.

Margie came up and touched my arm and said, "Bill?" I nodded, and she said, "This is me. Kiss me quick while we have a chance."

It was a proposition I'd never turn down, but I'll admit I looked a bit scared when I put my arms around her and complied.

She grinned impishly. "Sure, darling, Mother and Dad are probably looking, but so what? For all they know it's Mr. Wescott kissing the maid or your Slane O'-

Graeme making love to a mermaid, or the Senator—"

When her lips were free again, she said, "Bill, I took some shots on your candid before, when I—when I had the chance. Some of them are wows, too! Look, quick! Don't miss that!"

I laughed, and swung the candid around to get the shot.

WHEN I AWOKE it was ten o'clock, but I felt as though I'd had one hour's sleep instead of six. At four o'clock in the morning, I'd left Mr. Ames talking to Slane O'Graeme. And when Mr. Ames had said he'd want to talk to me in the morning, I'd already kissed my job good-bye.

The first thing I wanted to do was destroy those all-too-candid shots. But I wanted to develop them and have a look-see first. Maybe there'd be one or two mild ones it would be safe to take along as souvenirs.

I was taking the last of the positives out of the acid when there was a knock on my door, and I said, "Come in."

Mr. Ames, wearing a lounging robe, pushed through the door. I made a mental note to look in the mirror later to see if my face looked as bad as his. But, surprisingly, he grinned at me and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"What a night!" he sighed. "But—"

"But never again," I finished for him. "Yeah, I feel the same way. That stuff would have been dynamite to turn loose on the natives."

He nodded gloomily. "I suppose so, but—Well, it was my fault it's all gone. There isn't a trace left for analysis, and because it was my fault, I gave O'Graeme his price for it. Somehow I liked the little cuss. What're you doing?"

"Look," I said, and passed him the quick-drying rack.

He stared from one to another of the shots, and gulped. Then he stared some more and his face turned red, then pale.

"Bill," he said, "do you know these photographs would be worth a million credits to my enemies, and those of Westcott and the Senator? I hope you're not thinking of—"

I shook my head firmly. "Just developed them out of curiosity. I'm destroying them right now, and the films, too. Then if you say so, I'll leave."

I took the pictures back and started to tear them up.

"Leave? Oh, you think I—" He laughed at the gloomy expression on my face. "Now that you mention it, Bill, you *are* leaving. I've had you in mind for the Venusian Branch. We need a good man there to get things organized. You're taking over on the first."

I had another picture in my hand to tear up, but my heart was making flip-flops. Manager of the Venusian Branch! Why, that meant I'd be able to offer Margie a real home!

"Uh—Mr. Ames," I said, "Margie and I are in love. We want to get married."

He shrugged, his face suddenly gloomy. "Margie's told me that, Bill. But her mother— Well, you're not blind. You know how much say so I— Hey, don't tear *those* up!"

THE YELL was so sudden and unexpected that I jumped and dropped the rack from which I'd been peeling the pictures while we talked. I'd torn up only a few.

Fleming Ames picked up the rack, his eyes gleaming. He looked it over eagerly and picked off four pictures. I walked around to see which they were, and grinned as I suddenly understood.

One was Mrs. Ames seated with her feet on the coffee table smoking a big black cigar. Another was Mrs. Ames, her hair in wild disarray and her mouth open, trying to swim across the room. A third was Mrs. Ames—but why go into details?

"Bill," said Mr. Ames, his face happier than I'd ever seen it before, "your wedding day is next Saturday. And that's from a man who knows—from the present and future boss of the Ames household. And you can take my new space-cruiser for your honeymoon."

He stood up and stuck out his hand and I shook it.

"And Bill," he added wistfully. "If you should stop on any planetoids, and see any peculiar-looking species of lichen—"

THE SEVEN JEWELS OF CHAMAR

By **RAYMOND F. JONES**

THE BEARDED GIANT, Thymar Ormondy, raised stiffly on one arm from the bed of litter on the damp cave floor. He pointed the charred stub of his other arm at his son.

"Beware the Firebird!" His voice was distorted with pain. "She'll kill a thousand men for every one of the Seven Jewels of Chamar."

Nathan Ormondy threw back his rain cape and knelt beside his dying father. The great hulk of the old man sank back upon the rags.

"Did she do this?" Nathan demanded fiercely. His eyes filled with flame at the sight of the terrible wound that had come from a shot in the back.

Thymar lay without answering. His eyes



Scattered, they flamed like distant suns, maddening the beholder. United, they became a godlike power for the glory of the Solar System. But, their flame-lances still white-hot from killing, young Ormondy and the fabulous Firebird learned how impossible was the price of that power.

There seemed to be the perfume of flowers in the air, and the song of birds.



were closed. Nathan heard only the hushing sound of the eternal Venusian rains that blotted out the distant hills like a ragged curtain hung over the mouth of the cave.

Behind Nathan another shaggy spaceman touched his shoulder. It was Tabor, his father's companion. The two police custodians from Aquatown shifted uneasily.

"Was it Firebird?" Nathan demanded of the watchers.

Before they could answer, Thymar's remaining hand fell upon Nathan's wrist. "There is more to tell," the old spaceman whispered.

Nathan hunched lower to seize every word. "What is it?"

"The Jewels of Chamar—"

"Curse the Jewels of Chamar! They stink with blood. I'd blast them all if I could!"

Thymar's wide, steel eyes opened slowly. The leather of his face crinkled like finely tanned doeskin.

"When you have looked into the blue depths of a stone that is like the eye of all the universe you'll never be able to turn your back upon it. You'll never rest until you have found all seven of the Jewels—or death."

"Death is all that anyone has ever found."

"Ah," said Thymar, "but one man will find himself the master of all the universe when once he holds all seven of the Jewels in his hands. That is the promise of the Jewels—mastery, power. And I know that it is true. I've held them—as many as five of them at once, and I know what it means. There's a force in them that sweeps through the brain and the soul. It lifts a man to power and strength beyond himself."

"Pah! Autohypnosis—or plain drunkenness. There are a thousand other names for it."

"No," said Thymar softly. "It's there—pure life force, or whatever it might be termed, but with those Jewels one man would be as ten thousand men, each greater than any Earth has produced.

"And you can be that man, Nathan!" The old spaceman raised again from the bed. "I bequeath to you the two Jewels that I have left. There were three, but—"

"Firebird?"

"That does not matter. I warned you of her because she has sworn to have the Jewels. I know she has two, maybe more. You'll have to kill her for them. Think what it would mean to the universe if that ruthless witch possessed the Jewels. Hell would be let loose.

"The Jewels are no concern of mine. I want to know only who did this to you."

Thymar sank back again. His voice whispered almost inaudibly, "Come closer."

"In the cave of Lava Mountain," he whispered hoarsely, "do you remember the Stone Pig? The two Jewels are there. It makes no difference who did this to me. Nothing matters but the Jewels of Chamar. Take them—and become master of the universe!"

"Who did—?" Then Nathan's fury-laden voice ceased. The only sound was the hush of rain outside. Slowly Nathan's head bent low. His father was dead. Never again would Thymar Ormondy's voice roar upon the spaceways or in the thousand tavern rendezvous of the spacemen.

Tabor put his hand upon Nathan's shoulder. "Sorry, son."

NATHAN ROSE. It was as if an electric charge had been thrust between the other men.

"I'll find the killer," said Nathan evenly. He looked down at the form on the cavern floor. "I'll find him if it takes the rest of my life. Why did he warn me of Firebird? Was it only because of the Jewels or do you think she could have done this?"

"He hated Firebird because of an old quarrel. She might done it, but I don't know. I was with Thymar in Aquatown when he received a message saying information concerning the Blue Jewel could be found here. He went alone and we were to meet a day later to leave for Mars. He didn't show up so I came here and found him like this."

Nathan nodded. The policeman, Cleeg, had told him that much after Tabor had sent word. But that was no help. It only served to fix Nathan's hatred more intensely upon the cursed Seven Jewels of Chamar.

"Was my father carrying any of the Jewels when he came here?"

"He had the Pink one. I tried to warn

him, but he said he could take care of it."

"And now it's gone, of course."

Tabor nodded. "The whole thing was a trap by someone who knew he had it."

"Who knew of it?"

"Half of Venus. He was drunk and boasting of it in the taverns the night before."

That was Thymar, Nathan thought, a great flagon of wine in one hand, boasting to the whole assemblage in some tavern, proclaiming his fabulous deeds upon the spaceways and challenging any one to dispute his word with flame lances.

"Take care of things, will you?" Nathan said abruptly. "I'll get back to the town."

"What are you going to do?"

"I think I know a way to trap the killer."

The policeman and Tabor looked startled. "Be careful, boy," said Tabor. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"No. Don't worry about me."

"Watch out for Firebird. She's on Venus now, and your father must have had a reason for his warning."

"Bah! She's nothing but a Calamity Jane legend. Have you ever traded flames with her?"

"I've seen men who have. They weren't alive to tell about it."

"Spacemen dislike combat with a woman so you've built up a myth about her to give an excuse for not killing her. But if she is the one who killed my father she's going to pay for it."

"Then why not let the police bring her in?"

"What police? Four planets have put a price on her head and she walks free in the cities of any of them."

"She's dangerous," Tabor repeated his warning. "And perhaps she is not the killer after all. There's no use crossing her trail needlessly."

"We'll soon know," Nathan promised.

He turned and strode out of the cavern of death while the two police officers began preparing his father's body for the trip back to the city under Tabor's direction. He paused a moment at the entrance and drew up the waterproof hood of his cloak and tied the knot beneath his chin, then went out into the sheeting rain.

At the bottom of the steep and slippery trail leading from the cave waited Perseus,

the white stallion imported from Earth. In a world still battling incessantly against the jungle the horse was one of the chief means of private transportation, even though practically extinct on Earth.

Perseus nuzzled against Nathan's neck and the man rested his face against the horse's head for a moment. Loneliness and weariness descended upon Nathan. He was lonelier than he had ever known he could be, he thought. Thymar had never given much companionship to his son because their adventurous spirits had led them in opposite directions. But the mere knowledge of Thymar's existence somewhere in the universe was the only companionship Nathan had needed. Now that was gone.

And somewhere on Venus was a murderer he had to kill.

II

IT WAS AFTER DARK when Nathan reached Aquatown. The streets of the Venusian frontier village literally flowed with water, proving the accuracy of its naming.

Lights on the corners and in front of the taverns were ghostly blobs in the rain. Few Earthmen were about, but the little polite Greenies of Venus swarmed the streets nodding and smiling when they saw Nathan. They knew and revered him as the great engineer from Earth who had brought lights and power to their wet, primitive world.

Aquatown was only a frontier village with more than its quota of taverns to drain away the savings of the restless spacemen who stopped for a day or a week, waiting for a new cargo or for ship repairs in the nearby Universal Yards.

Nathan's plan was fixed in his mind. He left Perseus at his lodgings and then headed for the taverns. The night's crowds were beginning to swarm in as he entered the first one.

It was hot and steamy inside, and the fog of smoke made it impossible to see the opposite wall. Bearded miners, lean adventurers, smooth fingered confidence men were the customers. Dance hall girls who had come from Earth for the adventure and stayed because of the utter dejection with which Venus filled them were the men's companions for the most part.

Nathan went directly to the bar and began ordering drinks. He grew more boisterous and his voice grew unsteady as he boasted and shouted of his good fortune in coming into possession of two of the Jewels of Chamar.

Then he left. He went to the next tavern and repeated the performance. During the night he made a tour of the taverns that would have done credit to old Thymar Ormondy himself.

And when the first light of Venusian dawn came he was stiff and immobile in the last of the taverns. The bouncers pitched him out into the mud and rain as the place closed up.

When he was alone Nathan rose and shook himself. He had accomplished his purpose. Every thug and murderer on Venus knew by now that Nathan Ormondy was going today to the secret cache of Jewels left by his father.

And Nathan knew that his father's killer would be not far behind as he moved up that mountain trail towards the cave in Lava Mountain.

He made his way through the mud and slime of the streets to his own lodging. There, after a quick bath and breakfast, he armed and checked the charge in each of two flame lances.

The weapons consisted of powerful electrodes with pistol grip handles. The electrodes were just less than eight inches in length and full charge was a thousand rounds. Nathan pocketed them solemnly, wondering if one of those charges would avenge his father's death.

He dressed in brown riding cape and donned a crimson helmet to make it easy to be followed. When he went out to the stable, Perseus seemed to sense the importance of their approaching mission and nickered eagerly.

Nathan let the horse have his head and they raced along the forest trail behind the city and upward to the hills. The tree branches overhead dripped water that was already stagnant. And somewhere in those trees Nathan knew that outlaws of four planets were silently watching, waiting for him to lead them to part of the fabulous treasure for which three generations of adventurers had searched.

His father's murderer was sure to be foremost among them.

NATHAN WONDERED if he could have saved his father's life by following him to the starways years ago. Born aboard a spaceship, Thymar had never claimed any planet for his own. He had tried to raise Nathan to be a starman like himself, but Nathan had seen the advancing wave of civilization beating upon the shores of alien planets and knew the only sure foundation would be built by the engineers, not by the wandering starmen. So he had chosen to fight the battles of engineering on primitive worlds. He was following the starways in a sense, but it broke Thymar's heart when Nathan became "civilized."

Then seven years ago Thymar had dedicated the remainder of his life to the recovery of the fabled, mysterious Jewels of Chamar.

The story of the cursed Jewels was obscure. No one knew their origin. There was little more than the age old myth that to hold all seven would make a man master of the universe, but to hold less than seven would bring eventual death.

The latter at least was no myth, Nathan thought grimly.

The trail became steep as the trees thinned and the horse broke out upon the hillside. There was a moment of sunlight blinding in its beauty. Then dark clouds closed over again.

Nathan rode out along a ridge trail where he was silhouetted against the sky. He stood for a moment, making himself as conspicuous as possible to the unseen followers he knew were behind him. Ahead, the tall spire of Lava Mountain loomed against the gray blanket of the sky. It seemed near in its majestic might, but it was nearly midday when Nathan reached the foot of it.

The sight of the mountain at close range brought back a thousand memories to Nathan. He had spent much of his boyhood here and this was where Thymar had taught him in the rugged ways of living of the spacemen. Here he had learned from Thymar and Tabor to master the flame lance until there was hardly a spaceman that could match his skill.

The mouth of the great cavern was in sight now, high up on the face of the mountain. He hoped the narrow trail he and Thymar had so laboriously cut out

was still there. It appeared to be. He guided the horse up the beginning of the steep cut.

He drew out one of the flame lances now and kept a sharp watch on the trail below. He knew that he was in no danger from anyone with a sense of calculation. That type of renegade would wait until Nathan had recovered the Jewels before attacking. But some brainless fool might try to pick him off now and search the cave on his own.

From far down the trail came the sudden clatter of rocks as a slide was started by a careless step, but no one was visible behind the ridges. Nathan had a clear view of his last hour's ride. So far, he was in the clear.

He looked cautiously at the cliff above him. Attack from that angle was not entirely impossible—especially if Firebird was in the vicinity. He knew she would not be with the followers behind him.

But now the last two hundred feet of the steep trail were before him. The great maw of the cavern was like a black cloud against the dirty white rock of the mountain. He touched his heels sharply to the flanks of the horse, and Perseus leaped up the incline in long jumps that carried horse and rider on into the black cave.

Instantly, Nathan leaped off and flung himself behind a giant stalagmite, half expecting a flame ball to be hurled at him from out of the darkness.

BUT A FLAME would have been welcome after the darkness and silence that pervaded the place. Only the distant sounds of the now emboldened pursuers came from the ridge below.

Nathan moved to the entrance and obtained his first glimpse of the pursuers. A battle skirmish had broken out between them. He had expected that. A man who had already killed for the Jewels would not welcome competition.

Nathan moved back and ordered the horse into a niche in the wall. He was dismayed somewhat by the number of men he had seen on the trail. There were at least twenty taking part in the skirmish and doubtless more were hidden from his sight. Determining the murderer would be difficult in such a mob.

The stalagmite which Nathan and his

father had called the Stone Pig was nearly a half mile back into the mountain along a tortuous trail. He could not be sure that falling stalactites had not blocked the way, so Nathan was forced to risk a light after leaving the mouth of the cave.

The cave was hot. Steamy fog filled the air as he came at last to the small room of the Stone Pig. He knew that some of his pursuers must be near the cavern by now. He needed time to get to a hidden gallery overlooking the path they would have to traverse.

Nothing seemed changed from the time he had last been near the Stone Pig. The grotesquely formed stalagmite was shiny with moisture and its enigmatic grin seemed to challenge Nathan to find out the things it had seen while he had been gone.

A sense of excitement and anticipation seized Nathan despite his efforts to control his feelings. He thought of the boyhood days when he had hidden secret "maps" and strange and precious "formulae" beneath the Stone Pig. Now he was to see for the first time the fabulous gems that had cost so many lives, including his father's.

He pushed the stalagmite and it toppled over heavily. In the small, hollow space beneath it lay the same metal can that he had used so long ago. He pried open the lid.

There lay the Jewels—one green, one red.

But the gasp that escaped his lips at their sudden beauty was smothered in the sudden roar of deafening thunder that came from the cavern mouth far behind him.

He jerked to his feet. The air compression waves staggered him so that he tottered drunkenly for a moment and the sound battered his body. A flood of dust laden air flowed over him. Then gradually it settled about the chamber and there was only silence once more.

Nathan looked back at the box. A cleverly arranged switch had closed when he opened the lid, exploding the thunderous charge at the mouth of the cave. He struggled mentally with the problem of who had placed the explosive and the switch to seal the cave.

Perhaps Thymar had placed it as protection against robbery and his mind had

been so affected by his wounds that he had forgotten it. Or someone might have planted it as a trap. But, if so, why were the Jewels left?

Almost forgetting that he was sealed in the cavern, he knelt down beside the box. The inner light of the Jewels pierced his eyes and seized his mind in a hypnotic trance. For an instant he thought he was gazing upon the beauties of some fair and alien world. In the red one there was a fantastic garden of Mars, but a Mars where no red sand clouds ever covered the cities with smothering death.

And in the green one he saw a fair and lovely vision of Earth so real it pierced him with nostalgia.

Then the visions faded. Whether he actually saw them or they were figments of imagination he never knew. But he had to shake his head and tear his sight away from the Jewels in order to pocket them.

Then, as he turned away, there broke upon the air a high pitched song that trilled a moment's melody. It hung as if a crystal were suspended in the cavern, echoing its vibrations from chamber to chamber.

It came again. Nathan straightened and put out the light. He whipped out both flame lances.

It was the song of the Firebird.

III

NATHAN DARTED out of the room of the Stone Pig, guided by his intimate knowledge of the cavern. He waited a moment by the entrance, listening in the darkness. Then he heard the soft scrape of a sandal against a rock somewhere. And a voice.

"Nathan Ormondy!"

It called his name softly, echoing in the cavern, and it was like no other voice he had ever heard. The music of its overtones was brilliant and glowing like the inner light of the Jewels of Chamar themselves.

"I have come for you, Firebird," said Nathan. "Ready your flame lance."

He darted away, expecting a flame to be hurled at the sound of his voice. None came. He waited, hoping Firebird would answer and give him a target.*

That first sound of her voice haunted him. It was the loveliness of a spring

day on Earth, the blue of the sky and the song of the birds—but it was the song of the Firebird, a song of death.

Then she answered. "I came to make peace, Nathan. Put up your lance and make a light."

He aimed in the darkness—and could not fire at that voice.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" he muttered savagely. It was to himself as well as to Firebird.

"You *are* a fool!" Firebird hissed in anger. "I came to you peacefully."

From across the chamber a ball of fire the size of an orange spurted with the speed of lightning. It splattered the wall two feet from Nathan. The heat of its explosion singed his cape to a shred. His face was scorched and his eyes blinded temporarily.

Nathan aimed again and unleashed a blast of his own, but it went wide for he did not even glimpse Firebird in its glow. He leaped away to hiding behind a large stalagmite.

"Listen to me!" the voice of Firebird commanded again. "I could have killed you then. My shot landed two feet to the left of you. Now will you hear what I have to say?"

"It's easy to call your shots after they are fired."

"Here's one neither to the right or left," said Firebird evenly.

Before she finished speaking a blast of flame burst over the huge stalagmite in front of Nathan. The fire of it flowed around the sides and enveloped him in a searing blanket.

For the first time, Nathan knew fear. The witch could see in the dark! He was at her mercy.

Her voice spoke more softly now. "Are you coming out from behind there or do I have to come and get you?"

"You'll have to come and get me—the same way you got my father."

He leaped away to still another stalagmite. He paused midway to unleash his own burst from the flame lance. It splashed against the cavern wall, but there was no answering fire.

He waited tensely in the darkness. Minutes passed. Surely he could not have killed the Firebird with that blast. The silence could only mean then that she

was holding her fire, creeping up on him in the darkness.

"You have no excuse for my father's murder?" Nathan taunted. He slipped away to another protecting rock.

Then the voice of Firebird came again—and she hadn't moved! Nathan's eyes tried hopelessly to pierce the blackness to check the evidence of his ears.

Firebird said, "I was just wondering what I could say to a fool like you. If I killed your father for the Jewels why do you suppose that I didn't take them and go? Why should I have left them, and prepared the trap to destroy the cave mouth?"

"Is there anyone who knows the mysterious ways of the thief and killer, Firebird?"

"I have never stolen except from thieves. I have never killed—except murderers."

"My father was not a murderer!"

"And I did not kill him. Your father and I were partners for many years. We searched together for the Seven Jewels."

"I don't believe that. He warned me against you."

"Yes. Because we quarrelled. I'll tell you about it some day. Together, we found five of the Seven Jewels. One of his three was stolen by the murderer. Now, there are four of the Jewels equally divided between you and me. It is senseless for us to fight. There is power enough for us both when the Seven are ours. In return for your cooperation I promise to help you find your father's murderer. You know my reputation well enough to know what my promise means. And remember, I could have taken the Jewels instead of bargaining with you, but the Firebird is not a thief."

Nathan didn't believe a word of what she said, but he knew that if he continued to challenge Firebird with the flame lance it would not take her a dozen shots to find him in the darkness. Though he had been taught by Thymar he could not match such shooting. He would be lucky to find her with a hundred shots. No wonder her prowess had become a legend.

"I'll compromise—with one reservation," he said. "I think you killed my father. I know you can kill me here in

the darkness. I don't know why you don't. I'll accept your offer, but unless you prove you did not kill my father, you and I will sometime again trade flames to the death."

"Done," said Firebird.

ALMOST INSTANTLY, a pink glow began filling the chamber. It was like the rising of the sun over one of Earth's quiet seas. There seemed to be the perfume of flowers in the air, and the song of birds.

And then Nathan realized it was Firebird's song—that high-pitched melody that caused a faint chill to race the length of his spine.

The glow, too, was coming from her. It heightened with a tremendous, terrifying crescendo. Nathan had heard babbling outlaws who swore drunkenly to having seen this sight.

He stood immobile now, not breathing in the face of the wondrous glory of that unfolding light. The Firebird herself was so dazzling that the pink radiance blinded him after the darkness, but when his eyes became accustomed to it he saw her.

She was small, almost tiny, and exquisitely shaped. Her head was encased in a close fitting silver helmet that did not prevent her flowing, raven hair from tumbling over the nape of her neck. As she stood there in the rising glow she seemed poised for flight.

A close fitting tunic that seemed to be of scarlet tinted mail protected her body, but her arms and legs were bare and from her very flesh the pink light was emanating.

Nathan murmured, half to himself, "Beautiful—and inhuman! Who are you?"

The Firebird smiled. And Nathan moved slowly towards her. It was incredible that such evil as he had heard of the Firebird could have come out of such beauty.

"Perhaps you shall know who I am some day. For now, our agreement does not call for that. Would you mind pocketing your flame lance before we go on?"

Nathan realized his hand still gripped the weapon and it was trained on the girl. It would take only a squeeze of his finger to erase her evil—

"Better not try it," she warned, and

the smile did not leave her lips. He looked down at her hand. Her own weapon was trained with equal sureness upon him.

Instinctively, then, he knew that all the stories about the fabulous quick draw of the Firebird were true. If he so much as thought of killing her, her finger would squeeze the trigger of her flame lance a thousand times quicker than his.

He pocketed the weapon slowly and smiled at her.

"How do we get out?" he said. "Is the passage blocked?"

"Completely," Firebird said. "Or else the gentlemen who were so anxious to meet you here would have arrived by now."

"You planted the explosive?"

"Yes. I wanted our interview in private, not amidst a battle."

"How do you know there is any other way out?"

"Your father and I built it long ago."

Nathan remained silent. Was it only some purposeful fiction, or had his father actually been partners with Firebird?

She turned her back upon him and led the way out of the chamber by her own mysterious radiance. He could draw his flame lance now, Nathan thought. But it was only a thought. He wondered if he could ever seek vengeance upon such beauty regardless of what she had done in the past.

There was a temptation almost stronger than vengeance now, a temptation to see this whole affair all the way through—to find out the true identity of the fabled Firebird and the secret of the Seven Jewels of Chamar.

For a time they walked towards the blocked entrance, then they turned abruptly aside into a narrow passage. The slim Firebird passed through easily but for Nathan it was a tight squeeze that grew narrower as he went.

A strangling sense of claustrophobia seized him. He pressed almost frantically to get past the bottleneck. If this were a trap Firebird could shoot before he could get a hand near a weapon.

Then he saw her waiting for him ahead in the larger chamber to which the narrow passage led. She seemed to read his thoughts.

"Do you trust me now?"

"Does anyone really trust the Firebird—anyone on the nine worlds?"

The sudden sobering of her face was a terrible thing to see. She turned away so hastily that Nathan barely saw the expression, but he saw enough to know that there was weakness in her. She was not all iron strength. He saw enough to know that the incredible, storied Firebird had no friend in all the System and he knew what that fact meant to her.

IV

NATHAN HAD NEVER BEEN in the part of the cavern which they were entering. He knew the narrow passage must have been covered by a thin shell of rock in his time.

They came at last into a chamber that was the equal in size of the main one. There was daylight visible and the pink radiance from Firebird began to die. When it was gone she seemed smaller and more fragile than ever. Only the little blue lights in her eyes seemed hard and unyielding.

Within the chamber Nathan stopped and gasped. There was the glistening, silver hull of a space cruiser. And high on the nose of it was the dread name: *Corsair*.

Corsair—the famed pirate vessel that had outrun every ship that had ever pursued it. In a hundred acts of piracy, the Firebird had escaped without leaving a trace by means of the *Corsair*.

She watched as he admired the ship. "Like it?"

"So this is the famous *Corsair*," he said, "—and your hideout. You must be sure of your ability to win me as an ally or to kill me."

"I am—sure of both. But I need you more as an ally. Shall we go in?"

The needle-like hull housed a long, spiral catway that led to the cabins and control room. Halfway to the nose Firebird showed Nathan a tiny cabin which he could use.

"You'll find a supply of clothing," she said. "I find it necessary to prepare for occasional guests who forget to bring luggage."

Guests taken from space liners in the midst of interplanetary space, Nathan thought. He wondered what had become

of the many that the Firebird had kidnapped that way.

"And now the control room," she said. "I want you to become familiar with the operation of the ship."

All the ships that Nathan had ever known seemed like clumsy scows beside this splendid vessel. Every device known to space navigation and combat was in the equipment. And many instruments he failed to recognize.

"Who designed this ship?"

"My father."

"Father—" Somehow Nathan found himself unable to associate the Firebird with any of the normalcies of life. "Who was your father?"

Her smile was wry. "A man who was little known during his lifetime."

He didn't pursue the subject; they could go into that later. He said, "What I'm interested in is what do we do now?"

"We are going to find the other three Jewels. One of them is in the hands of your father's murderer. We do not need to worry about losing track of that because he will follow us."

"You know who it is?"

"Yes—but you would not believe me."

"Tell me!" He stepped forward, his big hands closing as if upon a throat.

"Our bargain," the girl reminded him. "The Jewels first—I swear we'll not lose him."

"The other Jewels — where are they, then?"

"One of them is buried inaccessibly in a mountain on Mars. The other is in the possession of one of three outlaws all of whom are on Mars. I have traced it to one of them. So that is where we are going."

"How do you know who has them?"

"That's a long story," said Firebird, "and one that has cost many years of my life. And would have cost more without Thymar's help."

"I'd like to know more of your story about him. He never told me until he died that he had known you."

"It can wait."

Satisfied that the controls were in order, the girl turned her attention to the engines.

"There's trouble in the port motor," she said. "It can't be repaired with the

facilities available to us here. We'll have to take a chance using it."

Nathan was about to protest, then changed his mind. He and his father had gone into space so often with decrepit and half worn equipment that it should have made no difference, but this vessel was so sleek and perfect that danger seemed to lurk in any minor imperfection.

Nathan strapped himself into the inertia-controlling chair next to Firebird. He studied the duplicate controls in front of him but kept his hands off.

Firebird started the warming coils to preheat the tubes. After a moment she adjusted the ignition controls and twisted the fuel valve.

Nathan felt as if he had been slapped suddenly with a giant pillow that pressed him flat in the chair. The acceleration of the *Corsair* was greater than any he had experienced before, and his father's old ship had never been equipped with inertia chairs.

He caught no glimpse of the edge of the cavern's maw as the ship passed upward through it. One instant they were in the cave, the next they were in the sky and only seconds passed until they were soaring above the thick cloud layer of Venus.

After five minutes of such intense acceleration, the Firebird relaxed and cut the controls to a point where they could breathe more easily.

"Why the hurry?" Nathan gasped. "Nobody is chasing us!"

Firebird made no answer. She reached towards the small panel at the lower edge of the control board and switched on the viewing plate. Silently, she scanned the heavens behind them and the surface of the planet they were leaving. The focus of the plate extended and retreated, then suddenly it concentrated upon a blunt-nosed black vessel rising somewhere below them.

"The Black Warrior," said Firebird. "He was watching for us to leave."

NATHAN WATCHED the black ship for hours while Firebird guided the *Corsair*. Steadily the strange vessel gained on them.

"We could outrun him easily," said Firebird, "if it weren't for that bad motor."

"Do you know how to handle light cruiser lances?"

"My father never carried a gun on his ship in his life."

"I remember," said Firebird. "How I used to argue with him. He said he wouldn't risk being caught by the police in an armed vessel, so he never came aboard the *Corsair*."

"Perhaps a wiser man than his son," said Nathan.

He told himself he wanted no part of this. He was an engineer, not a buccancer. Yet as the black vessel approached he felt the thrill of its challenge. The challenge of combat in the impersonal depths of space.

His father had felt that challenge—the challenge of men and of space itself, and he had met it with his own bare hands. It was impossible for Nathan not to feel it.

They kept their steady pace at an acceleration something more than fifteen G's. Firebird gave Nathan brief instructions in the operation of the weapons and controls.

A viewing screen provided Nathan with sights. Its scale automatically corrected for the relative motions of the two vessels.

Abruptly, and without warning, the Black Warrior fired. The *Corsair's* defensive screens caught the blast with an absorption of energy that made the dissipators whine and grow incandescent.

"He's using high powered stuff," said Nathan. "Those screens can't take much of that."

"They weren't meant to. The *Corsair's* main defense is her speed. There wasn't room for heavy screens. This time our defense has to be better shooting. Watch this."

As she spoke, she caught the enemy ship dead in the sights and depressed the firing button. A cloud of bright vapor seemed to envelope the black hull. Then all was as before.

"He's got our screens beat," said Nathan. "We'll never get through them."

Firebird smiled. "That's the first time that's been said in the *Corsair*. I hope your pessimism doesn't jinx us."

The black ship was swinging back, maneuvering closer.

"Hang on!" Firebird exclaimed. She flung the *Corsair* into a tight turn and held it.

Simultaneously, she fired the four big lances in the stern and left a trail of flame balls that made it impossible for the enemy to follow in their wake. Then, forcing the ship into a close spiral, she nosed towards the black ship and fired the four forward lances together.

Nathan watched, his hands clenched to knuckle whitenesses on the control panel, as the four flames combined and enveloped the enemy. This time the Black Warrior's screens flamed lividly. The big ship heeled crazily away, twisting under the forces unleashed upon it.

But the black ship was vicious in its death agonies. Nathan saw its beams lash out and yelled to Firebird, "Don't cross his stern!"

Firebird saw her mistake. Both of them twisted at the dual controls to swing the *Corsair* away from that cone of destruction into which it was plunging.

It was too late. They swept across the stern of the Black Warrior which was blasting with all it had. The *Corsair's* screen lit momentarily. Then the dissipators exploded in a crushing blast in the depths of the ship.

The interior of the control room came alive with flame. Firebird flung her hands before her face and her silver helmet was encased in a halo of fire.

What protected him, Nathan never knew, but he seemed to be just outside the sphere of burning destruction that burst through the walls of the control room in a hundred million pin pricks of flame. For an eternity he seemed frozen there watching the flame creeping over the slim form of Firebird—watching it burn and smother her.

Automatic cells closed the innumerable pin pricks made in the hull by the entering ions of fire. The control panel was blackened and burned. Then the flame-points faded out.

His hypnosis induced by the flame could not have lasted more than a fraction of a second, Nathan knew. But when he leaped out of the chair towards Firebird, he shuddered.

The bronze and pink of her flesh was burned to blackness.

IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE, he told himself numbly. This couldn't be the end of the storied Firebird. But it was. That charred corpse could never hold life again.

A poignant pain of sorrow filled him as he looked upon the figure and remembered the beauty of Firebird. He felt lost, and all the supreme purpose in their flight to Mars had ceased.

His mind drifted back to the scene in the cave when he had witnessed his father's death. He recalled the words his father had spoken—"You'll never rest until you have found all Seven of the Jewels—or death."

That's the way it had been with Thymar Ormondy. That's the way it had been with Firebird. All they had found was death.

Then, with a shock of horror, Nathan realized that was the way it would be with him, too. His father's words were true. He would never rest until he had found the secret of those evil Jewels or suffered the same fate that had befallen all the other spacemen who'd given their lives in that vain search.

But he'd find those Jewels, he knew. And someday he'd know the secret of the beautiful, the fantastic Firebird.

He wondered if his father's murder had been avenged with the death of Firebird. And he knew that he would never be sure as long as he lived.

Nathan cut the acceleration of the ship, and then bent over to unfasten the straps that held her in the inertia chair. Tenderly he picked up the light body that had held the strong will of Firebird.

He took a step towards the passage leading to the airlocks. And then he stopped in horror. The blackened lips of Firebird moved.

There was no sound. Only the ghostly movement of those lips to show that Firebird lived.

This was worse than death, Nathan thought. But she could not live long. He carried her to her own stateroom and laid her on the bed. He bent down and heard the faint beating of her heart.

From a cabinet he obtained salves and drugs to ease the pain when and if she regained consciousness. Even as he finished she began to stir.

She moved as if in tremendous pain, and

facial expression was impossible for her. Her lips moved again. But there was no sound.

If she should live, he knew he ought to head for Earth where the only adequate medical facilities were. But it was a long journey to the other side of the sun this time of year. The defunct motor would make it even longer. It seemed impossible that she could survive the trip.

The lips of Firebird were still moving, and now Nathan caught the trace of a word. He bent closer. She repeated the same sound over and over again.

"Luline—Luline—" was the word she breathed.

It made no sense to him. He wondered if the name were that of some unknown relative—or if she were merely delirious.

"Luline—Luline—take me to Luline—"

He spoke gently into her ear. "Who is Luline?"

She struggled mightily within herself against the pain waves attacking her. She gasped, "Chart C-R-46. Luline."

Nathan raced to the chart room. There it was. On Chart C-R-46, circled in red, was the word "Luline" beside a tiny asteroid.

This was more incomprehensible than ever. Or was the asteroid a burial place for her mysterious clan?

He debated heading for Earth. And then another question arose as he thought of her burned and tortured body. Even if she could live would she want to? On Earth her existence would be in the double prison of iron bars and her own damaged body.

He set the course for the asteroid, Luline.

V

SLOWLY, in the depths of black space there swelled the blob of rock that was the half mile diameter of Luline.

As the ship approached, Nathan examined the surface through the screens for a clue to Firebird's reason for wanting to go there. But it looked the same as any other of the thousands of rocks floating through the spacelanes. The only unusual feature was a small bright spot that appeared to be about ten feet in diameter. It was centered in the bottom of

a large depression on one side of the rock.

Firebird seemed to sense the presence of the asteroid as they neared. Her body twitched nervously. Or perhaps it was only her increasing battle with the powers of death.

When Nathan told her they had arrived she struggled to rise. She fell back helplessly, "The pool," she mumbled through lips that barely moved. "Bury me in the pool of Luline."

Though he had guessed it, Nathan was moved to pity because Firebird had known for so many hours that she was going to her own grave.

But he wondered what she meant by the pool of Luline. Was it that bright spot he had noticed? There could be no liquid out here in the depths of space.

It was difficult to land a familiar ship on an asteroid, and since Nathan had never landed the *Corsair* anywhere it was next to impossible to make an accurate landing. But the urgency of Firebird's desire told him it was worth the risk of taking the ship down upon the jagged surface of the strange little rock.

He swept around it in an ever narrowing spiral until he finally came low over the wide depression that held the shining "pool". He dropped the ship rapidly, braking the *Corsair* and letting it arc upwards to a stall.

Swiftly, Nathan cut the propulsion tubes. The forward brakes dropped the ship to the surface. The *Corsair* settled with a hard jolt. A poor landing but good under the circumstances.

Nathan hurried back to the stateroom of the Firebird. There he halted in the doorway at the sight that met his eyes. The Firebird had risen from the bunk and was standing in the middle of the room swaying like some disjointed robot, gibbering wildly through her nerveless lips. She was facing the port and shaking the stump of her hand at the shining pool visible outside.

Nathan caught her frantic words. "Air there—no suit—"

She was hysterical. He made up his mind. The life of Firebird was no more than a candle flame in a hurricane now. The least he could do was grant her final wishes. If she wanted him to end her life by thrusting her out into the cold of in-

terplanetary space and bury her in the "pool" it would be only merciful.

He donned a space suit quickly and went back to Firebird. She had collapsed into unconsciousness and lay in a pitiful huddle in the middle of the floor. Perhaps she was already dead, he thought.

Carrying her, he entered the airlock and paused the moment it required for evacuation. It seemed to take an unusually short time to equalize the pressure, then he stepped out. He had expected the body of Firebird to become distorted and instantly frozen by the cold, but she changed not at all as he stepped to the surface of the asteroid, held down by the traction shoes of the suit.

He checked the thermometer on his sleeve. Only thirty degrees below zero, and not falling.

He approached the pool that glistened like a shining disc of metal in the brilliant sunlight. He kicked a stone onto it, and ripples arose. It was liquid, and very dense—like a pool of mercury.

He came to the edge and looked one last time at the face of Firebird, the once beautiful Firebird. Then slowly, she dropped from his arms into the pool.

He stepped back and watched. For an instant it seemed as if she lay in the surface, half-submerged and unmoving. Then slow fingers of waves rose about her and dragged her beneath.

Abruptly she was gone. It was as if she had disappeared into the surface of a mirror. The depths of the liquid were invisible. The unmoving surface reflected only the white hot light of the pool into Nathan's eyes.

Firebird was gone. And with her disappearance there came to Nathan the conviction that there had been nothing evil in her. She had moved because she was driven by some wild and secret purpose that would not give her rest. A purpose bound up in the Seven Jewels of Chamar. And Nathan knew that somehow he would find the secret of the Jewels that had driven his own father to death.

HE SUDDENLY TURNED and ran back towards the ship. He wanted to get away as quickly as possible from this unreal world of Luline. It was a place that breathed the presence of strange and

alien ghosts. He would come back, though—he would return to solve the mystery of Firebird after he had been to Mars and obtained the remainder of the Jewels.

The *Corsair* rose slowly from Luline. He let the great ship circle once about the mass of rock, then turned into space towards Mars. He focused his viewing screen and glanced back at the tiny rock. The pool reflected the sun's rays like a great heliograph. Even at this distance it was too bright to gaze at for long.

His only goal now was possession of all of the Seven Jewels. Firebird had not shown him her two, but he knew they were somewhere within the ship. The vision of the glorious depths of the two in his own possession constantly floated before him as he let his thoughts drift back to them. He understood now the spell to which his father had succumbed.

He reached to turn the viewing screen off, but glanced for one last time at the asteroid. Suddenly the light reflected from the pool flickered and wavered. It was as if some hand were holding a giant mirror and shifting it back and forth—flashing some mysterious message across the depths of space, he thought. No doubt it was due to some peculiarity of refraction caused by the remnant of air that seemed to lie with the cup of the depression.

He turned to the charts and concentrated on the course. He checked the position of Mars now and what it would be at his estimated time of arrival. He put the figures into the computer.

The answer came out fantastically wrong. He tried again and failed.

IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE to concentrate. And he knew why. That shifting reflection from the pool of Luline. That unintelligible message flashed across space.

It could have been caused by the breaking of the surface of the pool.

It had to be caused by that.

And it would haunt him forever unless he turned back. He swung the *Corsair* into a turn that blacked out his vision, but when he could see again he was headed for the asteroid once more.

He came in too fast. He had to circle twice to brake his speed. Then the *Corsair*

sped down into the depression and over the pool.

Piloting required too much attention to keep a close watch on the shiny surface, but one brief glance brought a gasp from his throat. There was something lying at the edge of the pool that had not been there before.

His landing this time was made with a terrific jolt that rocked the ship. Then he entered the lock without waiting to don a spacesuit. He knew that Firebird had been right when she said it was unnecessary.

He kept the inner door of the lock closed to conserve the heat in the ship, but he swung the outer door open and plunged out.

He staggered in sudden pain as the shock of meeting that alien atmosphere swept over him. It was not atmosphere by any human standard. It was rarefied beyond capacity to support normal human life. He gasped in desperate breaths and the ice needles he breathed upon the air were sucked back in to spear his own lungs.

Black checkerboard screens flashed across his vision, but he could see now the object at the edge of the pool.

There was no questioning the instinct that had driven him to turn back the *Corsair*. Firebird lay huddled on the rocks by the pool.

She lay as if she had been running and had fallen forward on her face. Nathan reached her and turned her over. He stared in unbelief.

The swaths and bandages had vanished in the pool and her body lay white and cold under the strong light of the sun. There was not a mark on her. The mystic properties that lay in the strange pool had performed a miraculous resurrection and healed all traces of the ghastly burns.

Nathan did not know whether she was yet alive or dead. She was icy to his touch and unconscious, but he picked her up and started back to the ship.

The exertion in that atmosphere caused swirls of dizziness in his brain, and he did not even ponder the question of how gravity could be great enough to make walking possible. He expended every fraction of his draining energy to fight back to the ship.

At last he laid Firebird inside the lock of the *Corsair* and closed the outer door with the last dregs of his strength. Automatically, the lock began to fill with warm air until the inner door swung open.

Nathan's strength revived shortly. He turned to Firebird. Her black hair that spilled over the floor of the lock looked as if it had never been touched by the destroying fire. Her face was molded in the same lines of perfection as before. And her flesh was beginning to glow with the pink of life. The final miracle showed itself in her breathing. She was alive.

He carried her into the stateroom and wrapped her in blankets. Her body was still icy from her long exposure. He started to move away to get a hot drink when she should revive. Then her eyes opened.

She looked wildly about, then stared at him. "I thought you had abandoned me. Did your conscience get the better of you?"

The hardness of her voice shocked him. He looked at her in pained surprise. "I thought you were dead. I saw the flickering of the light from the pool when you came out of it. I came back then only because I couldn't believe you had really died."

"Of course. You couldn't really know, could you?" Abruptly she was crying. He sat down and took her hand.

"There is no one else in the System who would not have been glad to leave Firebird there forever," she said.

Nathan made no reply. He could not comprehend her strangeness. But for the moment she was no longer the fearless Firebird. She was a little girl, lonely and lost.

VI

MARS WAS WHOLESOME in death before the coming of the spacemen. Now it was the refuse heap of the Solar System.

There was Heliopolis, of course, The great, shining, chrome-plated space port where vessels from all parts of the System touched for refueling and recreation of the passengers. Recreation that was not legal on any of the other planets.

The permanent population of Heliopolis was three fourths confidence men. The

other fourth was made up of fugitives from penal colonies and thieves and murderers whose crimes had not caught up with them.

But these were the elite of the population of Mars. The lower types were found in the five suburbs surrounding Heliopolis.

The worst of the five was Taurus, where daily morning chores was burial of those who had been unfortunate in the night's tavern brawls.

As the *Corsair* approached the red planet Nathan wondered where the incomprehensible Firebird fit into this wild and evil city. But she claimed it for home. Regarding the miracle of Luline she had refused to say a word and his repeated inquiries only forced her to greater reticence and widened the gap between them until he was forced to give up.

It was night on that side of Mars when they dropped the *Corsair* onto the crowded field at the edge of Taurus. Amid the other vessels the ship stood like a jewel in a handful of gravel.

There was always a pause in the activities of the field when the ship of the Firebird came in. Attendants straightened up to stare, and wizened, space-burned adventurers paused when Firebird strode out of the port. She went down the ramp as if she were making a grand entrance into a ballroom. A thousand eyes were upon her, from corners of the field, from shops and all night eateries, and from the hulls of silent ships.

She was a living legend walking in their midst.

She gave instructions for the needed repairs to the *Corsair*, then the two of them started towards the town only a quarter of a mile away.

"What happens next?" said Nathan.

"Almost anything, but whatever it is it will require the use of your flame lance. Keep it handy. There will be a lot of waiting and listening. If you wait long enough you can hear all the secrets of the innermost chambers of the System revealed right in the taverns of Taurus.

"Our plan will be to let it be known that we have the four Jewels and are here for the other three. There'll be happenings enough after that. I'll leave it to you to spread that information."

Nathan did not question her further. They had arrived at the garish entrance to the "Orbit", a two story tavern a little larger than its neighbors. Nathan had heard his father mention the place as the unofficial headquarters of half the brigands on the spaceways.

The noise of gambling and of drinking and tavern music poured out upon them as they neared the place beneath the red brilliance of the sign overhead.

As Firebird stepped through the door, she threw back the crimson cape and tipped her chin a trifle higher. The tinkle of gambling chips and glasses halted and the babble of noise hushed. Firebird strode towards the bar, unmindful of the stares. Nathan came more slowly. He heard whispering, first at Firebird, then at himself. His hands stayed close to his flame lances.

At the bar, the squat-faced bartender, Louey, was pale and flushed by turns. His mouth gaped at Firebird as she said, "Tokeela, please."

Louey chattered, "You're supposed to be dead. Somebody seen you. You were dead for sure."

"And now I'm alive for sure. I don't know what you are talking about, but hurry with that Tokeela."

Louey shook his head as if to clear the vision he had seen. He brought the drink and some of the same for Nathan who was surprised that the place even served the mild, nonintoxicating drink.

Nathan wondered about Louey's remark. How had the rumor of Firebird's death been started? What was its significance?

As they picked up their glasses the babble slowly resumed, but Nathan knew they were still the center of attention.

Heavy smoke clouds rolled against the lights like miniature thunderheads. Through it Nathan watched the pale faces of the women who seldom saw daylight, and the bronze leathered faces of the spacemen. He could see them wondering who he was and if he were with Firebird, for he had not spoken to her since they had come in.

Firebird made it clear, She turned abruptly and faced the room. "Folks, I want you to meet Nathan Ormondy. You all knew his father. Thymar was killed on Venus and Nathan has come to take his

place on the spaceways. Come up and have a drink to the new spaceman, who is as good a man as his father ever was."

The music died. The room seemed to freeze.

NATHAN STARED at Firebird. She was smiling as if at some secret joke. The little fool, Nathan thought. She knew this would happen. Even his limited knowledge of their codes told him that much.

A big bronze spaceman at the nearest table looked up from his cards. "We don't let women buy our drinks," he said. He turned back to the cards.

Nathan swore under his breath. What was Firebird trying to do? But it was his move now.

The big spaceman picked up a card from his hand and moved to throw it on the table. The card vanished in midair and flakes of ash fell to the table. He glanced up at Nathan's flame lance carelessly resting against his hip.

"Perhaps you would accept an invitation from me," said Nathan slowly.

The spaceman eyed him narrowly. "We don't let women buy our drinks," he said.

His eyes didn't shift, and Nathan's seemed to flicker only for an instant. But it was long enough for the cards in the spacehand's hand to puff into flame. He dropped them frantically.

His face lighted with rage and he half rose from his chair, but he said nothing. Nathan's lance hung in the same position.

"I think it would be a good idea for you and me to be friends," said Nathan.

"Yeah," said the spaceman, "it could be a good idea at that."

He rose and stepped slowly to the bar. "Straight Scotch for mine," he told Louey. He turned to the rest of the crowd. "Come on up, folks. My friend here is buying us drinks."

The hubbub resumed slowly as the crowd followed his leadership to the bar. The spaceman edged close to Nathan.

"Name's Tompkins," he said. "Kind of taking after your old man, I see. Hanging around with the Firebird, I mean. I knew Thymar pretty well when he was trailing her skirts. Kind of always figured that he did the trigger work and she got the reputation."

His loud drawl drew the other spacemen in a ring that was growing tighter about Nathan. It was an old move.

"Please don't crowd," said Nathan. "There isn't room at the bar for everybody, but there is plenty of drink."

The men glanced at Tompkins.

"Sure. Don't crowd," said Tompkins. "The boy's a little trigger nervous tonight. Maybe going to do your first job for Firebird, huh? Does she allow you gambling and drinking money?"

Nathan lifted his glass slowly and studied Tompkins and the men about him. He could feel the unplumbed depths of emotion that was being turned upon him.

Then he got it. It was their pent up resentment and hatred of Firebird. They would not have dared bait her like this. It would have led to shooting, and none of them wanted to be known as her killer.

Their own peculiar codes were responsible for this. Dueling with Firebird would be open admission that she was their equal. She was perfectly safe in the tavern full of thieves and killers who would have welcomed news of her death at the hand of someone else.

Nathan felt like laughing at himself for considering himself something of a noble protector as he had entered the "Orbit" behind Firebird. In reality, she was safe, but the spacemen didn't mean for him to be alive when he left.

"You've got me all wrong, gentlemen," said Nathan. "I think Firebird killed my father and I'm stringing along to keep tabs on her. And we have a little agreement that might interest you. Between us we have four of the Seven Jewels of Chamar—"

INSTANTLY, the smirking, taunting grins became frozen deadliness. The circle pressed inward.

"I wouldn't come any closer," Nathan advised.

"Four of the Seven!" exclaimed Tompkins. "I think you're a liar."

"We'll take care of that later," said Nathan. "We've come to get the other three. Then we'll settle who is to keep them, as well as the matter of my father's murder. I mention it because I thought some of you gentlemen might help us. In fact, you might have one or more of

the Jewels right here in this room. We'll be glad to relieve you of them."

There was a dangerous trick with a flame lance that Nathan had learned from his father. The flame could be made to reflect from a wooden surface if the angle of incidence and the intensity of the beam were just right.

Nathan had watched the play building up in the circle about him. It was almost ready to go. Behind Tompkins, one of the spacemen had carefully drawn his flame lance. Nathan knew it by the slow movement of the man's shoulders and his attempts to keep his eyes carelessly forward.

Tompkins was keeping close against the man, one arm on the edge of the bar. In a moment the point of the lance would appear at Tompkins' waist and blast—as soon as Nathan's attention was turned away from Tompkins.

Carefully, Nathan weighed his chances. He had about a fifty-fifty chance of coming out alive. He wondered just why Firebird had devised such a trap. Right now she was sitting alone at a table on the opposite side of the room, apparently not paying any attention to what was going on.

He gauged his distance from the killer and moved a step closer to Tompkins while draining his glass. Then he swung suddenly away, turning his back on Tompkins. In the faces of the men surrounding him he could see the sudden change of expression, which they could not hide.

He called the bartender. "Fill up again, Louey. All around. I feel lucky tonight."

Simultaneously, his hand dropped carelessly to his side and twisted the pocket of his flame lance to point the electrode behind him. His little finger locked around the trigger and pressed.

A sharp scream arose from behind Tompkins and a flame lance clattered to the floor. Nathan whirled. Both his lances were in front of him when he faced Tompkins.

But Tompkins was staring down at the dead killer. And he was searching frantically for the source of the shot. Then his glance fell on the charred wood of the front of the bar where Nathan's reflection shot had turned.

At first his unbelief was amusing. Then

anger came like a hurricane across his face.

"The spacemen were hungry for a brawl. A hunching of Tompkins' shoulders would send them rushing. Nathan could kill perhaps a dozen before they got him. But there would be little satisfaction in that.

He said quietly, "I'll get you first, Tompkins. Better call off your dogs."

Tompkins hesitated. If he gave the signal, Nathan would kill him first. If he failed to give it, some drunk spaceman's shot might easily find his back.

Then a bellowing interruption solved Tompkins' problem for him. A newcomer burst into the tavern and grasped the scene.

He laughed with a gentle thunder. "Ho—I come to look for the son of Thymar and find him holding up the brawlingest joint on all Mars—including my old friend Trigger Tompkins!"

Nathan glanced out of the corner of his eye as Tabor strode forward.

VII

TABOR PUSHED his way into the crowd and the men backed away to return to their tables. The mob urge was broken.

"Put up your guns, Nathan. Can't you see that old Tom here is just having a little fun? Why, he wouldn't hurt a fly."

Nathan smiled thinly. "I hope the gentleman on the floor wasn't having a little fun, too. I'm afraid he won't be able to have it now."

Tompkins said sourly, "I thought you said Firebird and this young fool had been killed on the way here."

Tabor shrugged his shoulders. "That's the way news is here in these parts of the System. Nothing reliable. Everybody's liars."

He turned to Nathan. "There was some report about you and Firebird having gotten into trouble and I guess the story got exaggerated. I'm plenty glad to see you safe. I came in the *Sunbeam* to take you back to Venus."

"How did you know I was here?"

"The *Corsair* was seen leaving. I knew you'd be aboard."

"Why?"

Tabor shrugged. "I saw how Firebird

twisted your father around her little finger until he got wise. I knew you'd never be able to kill her or resist her. She's a witch. Stay aboard the *Sunbeam* tonight and we'll start back for Venus in the morning."

"I'm not going back. I'm staying aboard the *Corsair*."

Tabor's face darkened. "Your father warned you, son. She's poison. Already you are convinced that she didn't kill him, but it'll always be my personal opinion that she is the one who shot Thymar."

"I believe so, too, but she has offered to help me find out who did. I'm seeing it through to find out what she knows."

"She's a liar and a thief. She'll get the two Jewels your father left you and do the same to you as she did to him."

Nathan knew that seemed the obvious conclusion, but it wasn't reasonable in the face of things he had seen. There was something more that was far from obvious. There was the mystery of Firebird herself and the magic pool of Luline. And the mystery of the Jewels themselves.

"I'll find out my own way," said Nathan.

Tabor's face broke with a deep laugh then. "I might have known what your answer would be. In a lifetime of argument with Thymar I never won yet. I see I'm going to do the same with you. Let's drink. You and Firebird come aboard the *Sunbeam* for tonight. I'll leave for Venus in the morning and wait for you to come back—which won't be long, I'm predicting."

Nathan went over to the table where Firebird still seemed to ignore her surroundings. But there was admiration in her eyes.

"That was nice handling," she said. "I knew you could do it."

"It could have been done without shooting," said Nathan.

"You don't know the 'Orbit,'" Firebird replied with a smile. "No man sets foot in here for the first time without being tried by gunfire. I gave you the best possible opening. You took it like a veteran of the spaceways. They'll respect you, now."

"Tabor wants us to come aboard the *Sunbeam* for tonight. He's leaving for Venus in the morning and wants me to go

back, but I told him that I wouldn't."

"Rather curious—that rumor about our being killed on the way here," said Firebird.

"Possibly the Black Warrior was in communication with someone just before the battle and gave word that he was closing in on us."

"Possibly—" Firebird's eyes were gazing across the room towards Tabor. "I'll go aboard the *Sunbeam* on one condition," she said.

"What's that?"

"Let me have your two Jewels in my possession while we are aboard. I'll return them in the morning."

Nathan looked at her, trying to fathom her motives, wondering why he trusted her, why he wanted to trust her—

"Why?"

"The Jewels are synchro-responsive," said Firebird. "When several of them are together they indicate the near presence of another one by becoming warm. The more there are together, the warmer they become. When the nearby Jewel is very close the effect disappears."

"I don't see—"

"Tabor has one of the Jewels, I'm sure. The Pink one."

"But that's the one that was stolen! That would mean—"

"Exactly. How do you suppose he obtained the mistaken idea that we were dead? I'll tell you how it was: He tipped off the Black Warrior who attacked us in space. Tabor didn't dare do it himself, but he left it for the other killer to do, then Tabor planned to take our four Jewels from our attacker. That's why he came here—to look for the man."

"He came to take me back."

"Nonsense. That's a tale he thought up on the spur of the moment when he found that we were victorious in the space battle."

Nathan frowned. The story was logical even if it wasn't reasonable. But Firebird had no proof. Unless she could prove Tabor had the Pink Jewel—

Carefully concealing his emotions from the crowd in the tavern, Nathan unlocked the belt container of the Jewels and handed them over to Firebird.

"Tabor's waiting," he said.

For Tabor, Firebird donned another

cloak of personality, revealing still another facet of herself to bewilder Nathan. She taunted and baited Tabor as if trying to rouse his anger.

But the shaggy spaceman seemed to be in a mood that would not be ruffled by Firebird's taunts. Aboard the ship, they entered the tiny lounge cabin.

"I've got frozen Grier steak direct from Venus," Tabor said. "How does that sound?"

"O.K." said Nathan.

"Then I'll show you how a master cook of the spaceways prepares it."

He disappeared into the galley. Nathan watched Firebird. Her eyes darted about the walls of the cabin as if searching every panel and joint. She edged closer to Nathan on the narrow lounge seat. When Tabor was out of sight around the corner of the corridor, she took Nathan's hand and pressed it against the pouch where she had the four Jewels.

The pouch was almost too hot to touch.

QUESTIONS piled upon his lips. Firebird smiled without speaking. "But we don't know the color of it," said Nathan.

"Right. We don't know the color of it, except that it's either blue or pink."

"We'll find out soon enough," said Nathan. He rose from the seat, his lips pressed tightly.

"No!" Firebird grasped his arm. "We don't need to do that. We'll let him bring it to us when we need it. There's no danger of his going to Venus, now."

"What do you mean?" Nathan sat down reluctantly.

"We'll head for the Pater Mountains where the seventh Jewel is buried. You did a good job of letting it be known what we were here for. When we start buying equipment the word will get around that we are going for the seventh Jewel. You can be sure that Tabor will be there—and so will the holder of the remaining Jewel. We'll have the seven then. They'll be ours for the taking."

Nathan nodded. "Perhaps you are right. It would be easier to force Tabor to tip his hand out there than here in Taurus."

The next morning they said goodbye to Tabor and watched the *Sunbeam* lift

into the Martian sky. For a moment Nathan wondered if they were right. If Tabor should actually be heading for Venus—

Since the *Corsair* was being repaired they had a logical reason for preparing to go to the Pater Mountains by sand sled, besides the secret purpose of making it easy to trail them.

They made elaborate preparations. They visited every supply store in the Five Cities, pricing and examining sand sleds and boldly discussing their reason for wanting one.

By the time their equipment was assembled every spaceman in Taurus knew of their purpose and destination. And the word passed to the other towns on Mars as well.

It was a late afternoon two days later when they left Taurus. Firebird proposed a late start in order to make it easy for anyone to follow them. Since their destination was well known they anticipated ambush from ahead as well as trailing from behind.

Nathan climbed into the narrow seat of the sand sled beside Firebird. She took the wheel because she was familiar with the trail to the Mountains. When the transparent cowl was closed over them they seemed to be in a tiny, separate world all their own. Behind, the muffled roar of the propeller cut the air and mounted in intensity as the sled began to move forward and the runners hissed against the sand.

Firebird handled the sled as if any vehicle that traveled slower than a space ship was much too slow for her. She soon had the sled up to top speed over the level area near Taurus and soon they were weaving among the giant dunes.

The great, shifting dunes of the Martian desert were forty to fifty feet high. Already the valleys between them were filled with purple shadows and the air was turning cold.

The sled dipped and careened; sometimes it plunged into deep sand valleys and whipped around the curved walls of deep blow holes until it was tipped almost at right angles, clinging only by centrifugal force.

Nathan had the impression that Firebird was enjoying it. The treachery of the

desert was a challenge to her skillful, daredevil driving.

Soon the sun was down and the pale light of the twin moons was deceptive on the sands. Firebird slowed the plunging flight of the sled and drove cautiously then until near midnight.

"We should be somewhere near the town of PHEME, such as it is," she said. "The last time I saw it, it was almost a ghost town. It may have been completely abandoned by now."

"I've never heard of it," said Nathan.

In a moment Firebird exclaimed, "There it is! How's that for navigation over this desert? Right on the nose."

Nathan laughed at Firebird's exuberance over her accuracy. He knew that it was no small job to follow such an unmarked trail across the sands that shifted constantly and made landmarks impossible.

When he first saw the town it looked like only another group of dunes until he saw some of the silhouettes had angular corners. Too angular. Some of the walls he could see sloped crazily.

As they came near to the town it appeared more evident that it was merely abandoned wreckage. There were no lights at all to betray signs of occupation.

Slowly, Firebird brought the sled up to the edge of the group of buildings. The floor of the town, which had been laid over the sands to prevent the buildings from being buried or undermined by the winds was itself covered now with shifting sands and the walls of some of the structures leaned drunkenly under the heavy burden piled against them.

Instead of driving into the town, Firebird turned her lights onto the sand directly in front of the sled and began circling the ruin.

"Where are you going?" Nathan asked.

"I want to see if there are sled tracks leading into the ruins. Unless they've been waiting for a couple of days we should be able to forestall any ambush here."

They peered ahead as the spot of light moved slowly over the sand. But nowhere did they see the twin ruts marking the path of a sand sled.

Suddenly Firebird stopped. "No one would bring a sled up into the town if they wanted to ambush us. They'd know we would look for tracks. They would

leave the sled at a distance and come in on sand shoes."

"And it's almost impossible to track those."

"It can be done," Firebird said slowly. "But I don't think we'll have to do it."

"Why not?"

She placed his hand against the Jewel pouch. It was warm with warning heat.

"Whoever is here has one of the Jewels, and he's not more than two hundred feet away," said Firebird.

VIII

AS SHE spoke, a burst of flame spat-
ted sand in front of their sled. The
shower of exploding particles blasted
against the cowlings.

Firebird turned off the light and spun the sled in towards the buildings. She sped into the shadows along what had once been the short main street of PHEME. Then they darted into a shadow between two buildings.

"There may be more than one of them," said Nathan.

The girl shook her head. "Searchers for the Seven Jewels do not work in pairs. Not for long, anyway. One of them soon kills the other when they do," she added enigmatically.

Nathan glanced at her sharply, wondering if she were reminding him of their own precarious agreement—or accusing Tabor.

They emerged cautiously from the sled, each gripping one of their flame rifles in addition to the smaller lances.

"That shot came from the flat-roofed building at the end of the street," said Nathan.

"We'll get on the roof of this one," said Firebird. "It's a hotel. It's the highest in town. We can fire the other building and get anyone trying to escape."

No other shots came their way. Nathan feared their assailant was leaving the building on the corner and trailing them up the street.

They entered the old hotel. A foot of sand covered the first floor. The stairs were slippery with it. Shattered windows let the cold night breeze flow through. On the second and third floors they disturbed coveys of sand bats who fluttered and

squeaked and poured out the windows in a black cloud.

The enemy would certainly know their location now.

They came out onto the roof through a broken penthouse door, and in the faint moonlight they had a clear view of the decaying skeleton of the town.

The rifles they carried would shoot flames that spread over a great area and tended to hover like flaming coronae rather than piercing. Thus, they would be effective in firing the buildings.

They took up positions on opposite sides of the roof and sent a dozen shots into the base of the enemy hideout. But they had miscalculated as Nathan had feared. A fusillade of shots came from a roof directly across the street from them and their building burst into torrents of flame.

They transferred their fire to the building from which the shots came. The flames hovered and glowed like demons around the base of the structure, but they died like wraiths.

"I remember now," said Firebird. "That's the one fireproof building in PHEME. It was a special instrument laboratory. We'll have to smoke him out."

The tiny orange puffs of a flame lance came steadily from varying points of the other building as if the enemy were running about, pausing only long enough to shoot.

The flames from the burning building had already touched off the adjacent structures. The entire ghost town would be ablaze in a short time. Burning brands lit on the roof beside Nathan. They died, but others were coming in a rain of fire.

They could see the enemy by the light of the fire now. They fired the buildings on either side and forced him to keep low. But his shots were close and accurate. Nathan and Firebird shifted positions after each shot, but the parapet in front of them was seived accurately.

Then Nathan suddenly realized that the building behind them was aflame and its light silhouetted them against the holes in the parapet. No wonder the enemy could find them.

He shouted to Firebird, "Get down!"

She was too good a flame lancer to be disturbed by his shouting. She remained calmly in position, taking a bead on the

opposite window, waiting for the appearance of the top of the enemy's head.

He came up for a quick sight upon the perfect target of the holes which Firebird blacked out. They fired simultaneously.

Firebird's shot hit the edge of the window, spraying flame over the wall and curling it into the window. Some of it must have washed over the enemy, but too much of its energy had been dissipated to be effective.

BUT FIREBIRD was hit. Her body slumped down over the rifle and lay flat on the roof. Crawling on his belly, Nathan wriggled over to her and raised her head. She was unconscious, but no horrible blackening of her flesh showed the touch of flame lance fire. Then he saw where it had struck. Her silver helmet.

It was too hot to touch. He knocked it away with his fist. Beneath it, her raven hair was singed but slightly. The electric shock had done most of the damage. He bent over her tenderly and fanned her face with the edge of her scarlet cloak. She began to stir. She opened her eyes and looked up at him. In that instant he knew that their lives were inseparably welded. No word was spoken, but he felt her trembling as if she suddenly knew it, too, and was afraid of it.

After a moment she looked about and spoke, her voice unsteady. "We'll have to get down. The hotel is on fire."

Nathan followed the direction of her glance. The open door of the penthouse sent smoke billowing outward.

"We'll never get down through the interior," said Nathan. He glanced at the adjacent building. It was one story lower and ten feet away.

Firebird saw his glance and shook her head. "We can't get over that way. He'd shoot us the instant we tried it. We'll have to go inside."

"But it's impossible."

Firebird smiled. "After you've been to the pool of Luline, many things are possible. Here —"

She unclasped the cloak from her throat and threw it about Nathan. "Protect your head and wrap it around you as much as possible. It won't burn."

Before he could protest, she wriggled away over the surface of the roof, keep-

ing low out of the fire of their assailant. She plunged through the penthouse door into the inferno.

The smoke and flame billowed about her, licking at her slender, unprotected body. Nathan tried to catch her, but the blinding vapors made him stumble and fall clumsily. He wanted to throw the cloak about her again, but he was forced to gather it about him in order to make any headway at all.

Miraculously, Firebird seemed unharmed by the flames. On the second floor Nathan made out her figure hurrying far ahead of him. Her clothing was smouldering but her bare arms and legs seemed to glow with that same inner light that he had seen back in the cave on Venus.

He stumbled in the treacherous sand and lost sight of her again. He slid and fell down the first floor stairway, which was almost burned away. His weight on it sent ominous vibrations through it, and he tried to tread lightly.

Firebird was nowhere to be seen when he reached the street level. He raced outside in time to see the sand sled start up and disappear around the corner of the building. A puff of flame smashed against the sand in front of him. The enemy was watching for them to leave.

That was why Firebird had moved the sled. He went back into the burning building and fought his way to a back window out of the enemy's line of fire. He found Firebird waiting for him there. The smell of smoke was in her hair, but she seemed unharmed by the flames.

She gave him no time for questions. "I'm going to drive around the town. Fire every building with the rifle. That will drive him out eventually."

She twisted the sled out through the narrow street to the open desert and began circling. Nathan pressed the rifle through the open port and fired continually at the wooden buildings.

They watched sharply for their assailant, but he was apparently not aware of their escape. As they finished the circle, Firebird turned the sled out into the desert and swung up the far side of a high dune.

"We'll watch for him to make a break for his sled," she said. "When he does, we'll let him get started and follow closely."

He won't be able to fire while driving, and he won't dare stop because we'll be on him."

Nathan nodded. As Firebird stopped the sled, he handed her the cloak, a mere handful of cloth. "I'd like to know what the secret of this cloak is—and how you made it through that fire without protection."

Firebird smiled. "So would a lot of other people." Then she sobered and added, "I think perhaps you will be the one to know—some day."

She turned away and watched the burning ghost village. It was a beautiful hell of flame. Every building was yellow with fire. The desert was lit for miles around, and the sound of the crackling was like the sound of some great battle.

"He can't stay in there much longer," said Firebird. The heat was already strongly felt at the dune.

"There he is!" Nathan exclaimed.

A FIGURE burst suddenly out of the inferno and ran towards the far side of the burning town.

"We're on the wrong side," said Firebird. "Keep your eye on him and we'll move over if we can do it without being seen."

Cautiously, through the blow holes and behind dunes, they made their way forward. The sound of their engines and propellers was muffled in the roar of the fire.

They topped a rise and Nathan exclaimed, "There's his sled. He's moving."

"He must think we're dead," said Firebird. "He probably plans to come back and search the ruins for the Jewels when it's cooled off."

She added speed to overtake the other sled. It was in sight only part of the time and it would be easy to lose in the dunes and blow holes.

Nathan lowered the port a trifle and stuck the nose of the rifle through. He got a bead on the forward sled. And the instant he pressed the trigger, their own sled dipped down so that his shot went low.

But it served to warn their quarry of their presence. He must have whirled to get a look at them, for the sled wobbled crazily for an instant.

He dipped out of sight behind a dune

and was gone when they reached the spot. Dunes blocked sight in all directions and a dozen paths branched out between them.

"Over there!" Nathan pointed to a fine sand cloud that betrayed the presence of the sled beyond the dunes.

Firebird followed and soon they came in sight again. Nathan fired another shot that went wide because of the plunging motion of the sled. Then the enemy suddenly plunged into the depths of an immense blow hole.

Firebird swung wide of the hole. Nathan glanced at her in puzzlement. "Where are you going?"

"Not down there. It would be fatal to get into a dog fight around the sides of that blow hole. We'll wait for him to come out and hope it is somewhere near us."

From the top of a small dune they caught sight of the other sled speeding around the inside of the hole. But he knew he had failed to lure them into it where he would have had as good chance as they. He sped up and over the edge opposite them.

Firebird started the sled moving again. Nathan kept his eye on the enemy. Even as he watched the other paused. "He's not running away. He's going to turn and fight!"

Firebird held her speed down and let the other build up. He came in shooting. Puffs of flame spurted from the small lance he was firing through the port.

Nathan raised the rifle and fired. The shot struck midway between the motor and the cabin and the enemy sled burst into flames.

"Good hit!" exclaimed Firebird. Then her face tensed. "He's going to ram us. Get his steering runner."

The blazing sled was hurtling towards them at terrific speed now. It was impossible to turn aside so that the enemy could not follow easily. Firebird tried it and the other sled changed to a new collision course.

Nathan fired again. Then a shot pierced their own housing as Firebird tried to weave out of the collision course. It made shooting difficult for Nathan but he put another shot into the motor of the enemy.

The blazing comet of the enemy sled was less than three hundred feet away now. Firebird could have turned tail to avoid

collision, but that was apparently what the enemy wanted. His own position was increasingly desperate with the flames licking about the cabin and threatening the fuel tank.

Firebird kept weaving and brought out her own lance. She tried to hit the pilot, but her shots went wild.

"Stop weaving," said Nathan. "I've got to get a bead on that runner or we'll have to turn tail."

"It'll be your last shot," said Firebird, but she complied. Her slim hands held the sled steadily on a course towards the flaming wreckage that bore down upon them like a meteor.

Nathan raised in his seat and aimed carefully. He pressed the trigger. It was a hit. The steering runner of the enemy collapsed. The blazing sled reared end over end into the air hurtling towards them with the force of its momentum.

Firebird gave the wheel a mighty jerk and swerved aside as the wreckage plummeted into the space they had just vacated.

For moments they simply drove forward without saying anything as they lost speed.

"That was too close," Nathan said. "I waited too long for that shot."

"You got him. That's what counts."

He looked at Firebird. She was not disturbed by their narrow escape. It was obviously not in her philosophy to hold post mortems.

They swung back to the blazing wreckage. The light of dawn streaked the sky before it was cool enough to approach. There was no tangible remains of the enemy who had died in the flames.

"It couldn't have been Tabor. He shoots better than that," said Nathan.

Firebird poked among the embers, using the pouch containing the four Jewels as an indicator. Then she caught the sparkle in the sands.

It was the Blue Jewel.

IX

THE BLOODY dawn of Mars lit the ruins of PHEME as they sped past it again. Though they had not slept they did not feel sleepy as daylight came.

Their attack and the acquisition of the

Blue Jewel left two horrible alternatives in Nathan's mind. If it had been Tabor who had attacked them surely he had not known their identity and would not have fired on them if he had. In this case, Nathan had slain his father's lifelong friend without cause.

Of if it had not been Tabor it meant that Tabor possessed the sixth Jewel—the pink one — and was the murderer Nathan sought.

He thrust both thoughts out of his mind and forced himself to think of the task ahead. The peaks of the Pater Mountains were not even visible on the horizon. Soon the heat of the desert day made itself felt. They switched on the air conditioning after Nathan patched the hole in the cabin housing.

They ate as they drove, and in the afternoon, Firebird explained the course and they alternated driving and sleeping.

Near sunset they glimpsed the distant, ominous crags of the Pater Mountains. They looked like some gargantuan graveyard where the stark bones of giants had been heaped.

The wind was rising and spinning sheets of sand from the desert surface. The sandstorms of Mars are not simply the whipping, wind-driven sands of Earth. They are mighty electrical storms in which clouds of sand gather in the sky and are charged with millions of volts of potential by their ceaseless grinding against one another.

It grew dark quickly with the sand clouds masking the twilight. Streamers of fire began to lace the mountain top. A continuous purple corona gave it the aspect of luminescence.

The mountain rose slowly out of the desert and the sand gave way gradually to a trail of broken rocks that ground and protested against the runners of the sled.

"We'll go from here on foot in the morning," said Firebird. As she brought the sled to a halt she leaped quickly out and started tugging at a huge boulder nearby.

Nathan stared in puzzlement. The boulder slowly tipped on its side, exposing a small cavern.

"We'll hide the sled in here. I'll show you why in the morning."

They prepared a place to sleep for the

night and alternated watches. At dawn they gathered their packs of food and water and the weapons. Firebird carefully closed the cavern over the sled.

She led the way along the trail that soon rose to increasing heights above the desert. They came across the burned and blackened ruins of a sand sled, destroyed with all its equipment.

"That belonged to someone who came up here for the first time as well as the last," said Firebird. "There is no love lost between searchers for the Seven Jewels. They burn each others' sleds when found."

The corona lightning increased with terrible streamers of blue and violet light that twisted about the peaks like living things. The air was charged with ozone and Nathan felt the dry crackling of electric discharges in his hair and on his body.

Firebird abruptly left the trails and struck out across the face of the mountain. Nathan followed and soon they came to a large overhanging rock. They slipped beneath the overhang and came into a narrow, half-enclosed passage.

"Get behind me now and watch carefully," said Firebird. She turned and faced the opening under the overhang. "We may not have too long to wait."

Nathan didn't quite understand, but he waited in silence. Beyond the opening, the rocks were gathered round to form a sort of small vestibule and nothing could be seen beyond that.

But abruptly a man appeared in the vestibule. Firebird shot him without warning.

"I just saved twenty lives," she said through thin lips. "Robert the Dog has killed five innocent men that I know of. He could have been expected to kill twenty more if he had lived ten more years."

Nathan stared from the body of the dead man to the marble face of Firebird as she sat there—judge and executioner. They waited an hour and another man appeared. She killed him, too.

"I've saved his mother the agony of knowing him hung for treason. The police have been ready for a month to pull him in."

They waited until midday, but no one else appeared. At last Firebird turned and advanced cautiously along the passageway. Nathan felt now that killers lurked be-

hind every stone. He didn't need Firebird's warning to keep a sharp lookout.

They crept along a mile of the tortuous trail beneath the copper sky, then dipped suddenly into the blackness of a cavern. The ghostly corona that hovered over the mountain provided a faint gleam in the darkness but scarcely enough to guide them.

"Take my arm," said Firebird. "I can make it in the dark."

Nathan felt the tremor that was in her slight body. Some emotion beyond the grasp of his senses was surging through her. But he felt that before they left the cavern he would know what it was.

After a time they came to a spiral ramp that seemed to be endless as it dropped them into the depths of the purple glow. Suddenly Firebird placed Nathan's hand on the Jewel pouch. It was faintly warm.

"The buried Jewel?" Nathan whispered.

"No—the Pink one. We're still not far enough in. Your father's murderer was waiting for us somewhere inside. He's following us now."

NATHAN was filled with pain for either he had slain Tabor unjustly or else he would shortly kill him to avenge the murder of his father.

The ramp leveled out shortly and they made a sharp turn. Then Firebird halted. "This is where we stop. Be careful. He's behind us somewhere."

"Yes, right behind you."

Out of the darkness came the unmistakable voice of Tabor.

Nathan whirled, reaching for his guns, but Firebird gave him a mighty shove that sent him sprawling into the corner of a deep niche in the cavern wall.

"I thought you went to Venus," Nathan gasped in hate and rage. "What do you want, Tabor?"

"The Jewels of Chamar. I'm your friend and your father's friend, Nathan, but first I'm a spaceman, and the Jewels of Chamar are above all friendship to a spaceman. Still, I'm an honorable man. I'll fight you for them, Nathan."

"Why didn't you just shoot us in the back as you did my father?"

"Why will you misunderstand me, Nathan? I had to do what I did to force Thymar to reveal where he had hidden

the Jewels of Venus. He always said it was better for just one man to know that at a time. I agreed with him, but it was too bad that we didn't have the same man in mind."

"You dirty killer —"

"He'll accept your challenge on one condition," said Firebird. "Provided that you place the Pink Jewel in here in a pile with the others."

"You'll accept on no conditions at all!" roared Tabor, "if I say so. But I'd rather like to see them all together. Put them on the floor."

Firebird placed the five Jewels on the floor. Their rainbow phosphorescence seemed to Nathan to be a living force that touched him with strength and with peace.

From his hiding place behind a jagged boulder Tabor threw in the Pink Jewel and it landed beside the others. "Now, I've got something to fight for —!"

Firebird's flame lance aimed at the point where she had first seen the glowing Pink Jewel. A bubble of flame exploded.

Tabor's bellowing laugh ended in a roar of anger. "I'd know your touch anywhere, Firebird. Your honor was born in a pig pen."

Nathan tried to sense the direction of the sound. Then he aimed the rifle carefully. A ball of flame spattered upon the boulder and washed over its edges. He engraved the lighted scene in his mind.

"That was you, Nathan? You remember well what I told you about blackout combat. Use the rifle to illuminate the scene of battle. That is good. But do you remember what a rifle flame will do in a small space?"

Instantly, a rifle flame sped towards them. It blasted against the wall of the niche and flowed around in a sheet of blinding whiteness that gave off an intolerable heat before it died.

Nathan and Firebird crouched low at opposite sides of the opening.

"We'll have to get out," she whispered. "You take the right and I'll take the left, and we'll close in on him. Get behind cover as soon as possible."

"No! You can't risk that. It would be impossible to find cover before he illuminated you in a rifle flame. Let me try one more thing."

He sent another shot higher than the previous one. It burst upon the floor far

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behind Tabor. Nathan got a glimpse of a distant boulder directly behind the spot where Tabor was hidden.

Before he could shoot again another blast exploded within the niche. In its light, Nathan saw that Firebird was gone.

A wave of terror, an anxiety such as he had never known before, swept through him at the thought of her out there in plain view of Tabor. He aimed carefully with his small flame lance and tried to visualize the small boulder behind Tabor.

The flame hit and crashed away. Tabor's voice grunted, "A reflective shot? Good work, Nathan. Unfortunately I wasn't in the plane of incidence and reflection. And, Firebird, I hear you coming."

A sudden flame shot off towards the depths of the cavern at Nathan's left. There was a single agonizing scream in Firebird's voice.

Then nothing.

Tabor broke the silence. "Sorry, Nathan. I guess you'd gone pretty soft on her."

"You murderer!"

"Keep cool. Remember what I always taught you. Never let an enemy make you commit suicide by making you lose your head."

The niche was like a coffin in the darkness. Tabor's evil taunting and Firebird's scream seemed to combine in an echoing song of torment that swelled and beat upon his senses.

AND THEN, in the purple darkness, the six Jewels that lay on the floor seized his attention. Where their color had seemed merely phosphorescent before, it now seemed to blaze up as if hidden fires had come to life. Nathan watched to

make sure his eyes were not merely becoming more accustomed to the darkness. But it was more than that. The light pulsed and rose in the niche. It climbed the walls and filled the air with twitching streamers that seemed like living things.

And it was making him an easy target for a reflective shot from Tabor. But what did it matter what happened to him now that Firebird was gone?

He fired a half dozen shots in rapid succession.

"Wild, all wild," taunted Tabor. "You must do it with precision. Like this!"

A flame shot through the niche, but it ricocheted from the edge of the opening and missed Nathan's head by only a foot. The blast scorched his face and blinded his eyes.

"See what I mean?" said Tabor.

He had the range now, Nathan knew. That's what the rifle shots had been for—to enable him to determine a good spot to make a reflective shot into the depths of the niche.

But in his own wild shots Nathan had glimpsed something that gave him new hope.

He had to move quickly. Another shot from Tabor grazed close to him, but it reflected from the opposite side of the opening where Tabor had miscalculated that Nathan would move.

Nathan said nothing, but dropped to the floor. He adjusted the rifle to automatic fire, and lay in the opening of the niche. He pressed the trigger and a river of fire swept across the floor and flowed about the base of the boulder that hid Tabor—and under it!

The boulder rested on narrow, jagged faces, between which there were openings. It was through these that Tabor had been firing and Nathan had glimpsed the secret of his protection.

The flame raced about Tabor in a torrent of light. It leaped upon him and outlined him as if in St. Elmo's fire.

He jerked up in searing pain, and in that instant a single shot came from across the cavern and found its mark. The fire died before Tabor fell, but the sound of his dead body smashing to the floor was loud in the dark silence.

"Your father's murder is avenged," said a voice from across the cavern.

"Firebird. I thought —"

"I had to make you think what I made Tabor think. I threw a stone to give him a target. There was no protection out here. I had only one shot to risk."

Nathan rushed towards the sound of her voice, and crushed her close to him to reassure himself that she was unharmed. In the light of the Jewels that was now pouring from the niche he could almost see her face. It seemed rich with gladness.

The light was flickering now like auroral curtains of fire.

"What is it?" murmured Nathan.

"Wait—you'll see. This is what I've lived for. My work is finished now."

It seemed to Nathan that they stood there for an interminable length of time while the light rose and fell, but gradually swelled until they could see each other plainly.

There came a high note like the far away tinkling of chimes. The Jewels were rising from the floor. Firebird's hand on his arm restrained Nathan from rushing forward.

"Wait," she commanded.

The Jewels rose higher and then they began to float out of the niche towards the two Earthlings, carrying their ghostly light with them.

Nathan stared. Where there had been only six Jewels in the niche, there were now seven floating in the air. Three were end to end, forming a vertical pillar. Around this pillar the other four formed a rotating square. As it rotated faster or slower the pitch of the musical note rose or fell.

The singing, floating Jewels came nearer . . . vibrating with the forces of life. And then out of the midst of them a voice spoke.

"You have done well. You have my gratitude. I shall reward you."

Nathan felt a prickling of the back of his neck. And suddenly Firebird clutched his arm and was sobbing faintly. "Are we too late?" she asked.

"The ship of Plar has waited long, but the Envoys are patient. They await my report."

The Jewels wheeled in the air and sped towards the tunnel ramp that bore upward to the surface.

"Come," the voice said.



The Jewels rose higher, carrying their ghostly light with them.

Mechanically, Firebird followed. Nathan moved beside her, not looking back at the fallen Tabor.

"What is it?" Nathan whispered hoarsely. "Are the Jewels alive?"

"Long ago," said Firebird, "the Envoys of Plar came into our System. They came from a universe so far away that our greatest telescopes have never given a clue to its presence. The inhabitants of that world are life forms with a basis of metallic salts and they are formed as you see this one. They are literally Jewels. The life forces are contained in mighty storage cells of raw electronic energy reduced to

its simplest form. Some of the creatures are only single Jewels. The Envoys are of the highest type, having seven.

"The life in them was dormant until they were brought together again. The Seventh Jewel was the brain so to speak. Each of the others might be likened to an arm or other organ of a human body, though that is far from accurate. The warming of the Jewels as they were brought nearer was the reaching out of their mutual life forces to seize upon each other. But no controlling life was there until the Seventh was near. It was buried deep in the ground, but the attraction be-

tween it and the other six was enough to draw it out to reunite with them."

NATHAN WATCHED the weird form as it gyrated in the air before them and lighted the way through the caverns. "What does it mean?"

"Centuries ago—in our time—the Jewel Beings of Plar left on an expedition to explore the universe and study the inhabitants of the planets they came to. They found their science and skill to be so vastly superior to any other that they contacted, that they decided to help the backward peoples they found and share their science with those who could benefit by it. They hoped to speed the evolutionary advances of these races and some day establish a congress of the worlds. To those who had no space flight they revealed the secret of the art. And so on with other arts and sciences."

"Do they intend to make such gifts to the Solar System?"

"Their decision to help a race is determined by the report of one of the Envoys who is placed on a world for secret investigation. Chamar, the seven-jeweled one, was the Envoy placed to report on Earth and the Solar System."

"Chamar! But how did he get scattered. Wasn't that like death to him?"

"They are nearly immortal. Chamar was left here by the expedition and the rest of them went on. My grandfather was the first to whom Chamar revealed himself. But soon after that the Envoy was blasted in a laboratory explosion. My grandfather died of the injuries received there, but first he told my father about the Envoy."

"My father didn't know what the reaction of the other Envoys would be when they returned, but he felt they would deny the Solar System their gifts unless Chamar were restored to them. He spent the rest of his life in the search. When he died he passed on the responsibility to me. He forced me to swear I'd spend my life in the search. And I have done it willingly, for Earth will receive gifts beyond man's wildest dreaming."

"But the myth of the Seven Jewels has been in existence for nearly two hundred years!" Nathan exclaimed.

Firebird was silent. They came out of the purple darkness into daylight again.

The Envoy was barely visible in the light but the constant, high pitched note told of his presence.

"The legend of Firebird is almost that old, too," she said.

"But there are supposed to have been many who called themselves Firebird. Surely you—" Nathan halted and stared at her.

"There has been only one Firebird," she said. "Chamar made one gift to my grandfather before the explosion. That was the pool of Luline. When I was only fifteen my father took me to it and I dipped in it for the first time. Besides its miraculous healing properties, the pool slows the rate of decay of animal organisms. It gives a natural life of a thousand years. It changes human tissue. You have seen the light that comes from my flesh, and you have seen me walk unharmed in the flames at Pheme, as well as witnessing my vision in the dark. All these are of the pool of Luline. But in a hundred and fifty years I have aged only ten."

The end of the hidden trail brought them out onto the rocky mountainside. They walked until the sharp tinkle of bells swelled upon the air. Their eyes focussed in the space ahead of them. At first they could see nothing. Even the Envoy of Plar had become lost in the sunlight.

Then they caught the silken sheen of the almost invisible surface of the globe that hung in the air above the trail. The ship of Plar.

They knew instinctively that its substance was no material they could identify. Rather, it was a pure field, a segment out of another time, another space that hung there. It was massive, its dimensions uncertain.

Then a familiar sound came close to them in midair and they turned quickly.

"They have come," Chamar said. "I have given my report and now they are debating your case."

"Must they debate?" Firebird's voice was suddenly thin and a strange tremor was in it. "Is there doubt of their granting the gifts which they have?"

"Each world must stand upon its own merits."

"But you are one of them. Can you not tell us?"

"I am not permitted to vote upon a world which I have examined. That is the law."

THE ENVOY was suddenly motionless in the air before them, and a wild tinkling seemed to come from within the great invisible ship of Plar. An answering sound came from the Envoy.

"Envoy! What is it?" cried Firebird.

"They have come to a decision."

"The Gifts—?"

"Are not to be given."

There was no physical change in Firebird. Only her voice seemed as if her spirit had flown. "What have we done?" she asked.

"Not you—all the races of the System," said Chamar. "I have seen them all, felt their thoughts, known their actions in the century and a half that I have been here. I had to report the wars and bloodshed and thievery and hate that I have seen. I knew the Envoys would not grant their Gifts to such a System as yours."

"Is there only evil?" said Firebird. "Is there no good?"

"Not all is evil. But too much is. In a world where too many men want to rule all other men, we cannot bring powers that would be only a curse to you. Your eyes are too weak to stand the brightness of their light. Your backs lack strength to carry their burden. In ten thousand you may be ready, but until then the Envoys shall not return."

There was a moment of silence, then the Envoy spoke kindly. "You, Firebird, what would you do? Your self-chosen mission is completed."

Firebird's head came up slowly. "My mission is not completed. It has not even begun. I can shorten that ten thousand years. I'll stand in the way of a thousand men who would have it long. You'll come back to this System quicker because of me."

"That is good," Chamar said, and they imagined he was smiling benignly upon them. "That is what I hoped you would say. Because of your decision I shall stay even though my companions must go. I shall be near you all the rest of the days of your life, and when you want my help it shall be yours for the asking. Powers that I cannot give to you will be used for

you. You won't see me always for I shall do my own work, but wherever you are, call upon me and I will answer. I go to arrange with my companions."

The creature sped into the bubble of light and vanished from their sight. The bubble itself lifted from the surface and burst into the sky, leaving them alone.

The cold wind of the desert broke upon them and whipped their cloaks about their bodies. They stood as if still in a trance, but Nathan moved slowly down the trail after a moment, drawing Firebird by the arm.

They did not speak until they came to the sled. It was safe in the hiding place where they had left it. Nathan climbed behind the wheel and pointed the nose of the sled across the desert towards the far cities of Heliopolis and the Five Towns.

The sled hissed over the sands, rocked between the high dunes and challenged the desert winds. And there was exultation in that challenge.

He spoke at last. "Where are you going, now? Is this the end of Firebird?"

She shook her head and smiled wanly at him. "There'll never be an end to the Firebird. By the time I am dead the legends will be so fabulous that they will never die. I'll make the name of Firebird a name to be feared among thieves and murderers in the high and low place of society. I'll fight the cause of justice in the realms where the law can never reach. Firebird will be the name to scourge evil on the spaceways.

"And what of you, Nathan? Your father's murder is avenged. Will you return to Venus?"

She was trying to smile, but Nathan turned and saw the smile waver on her lips, and his heart beat harder because he thought he knew why it wavered.

There was in her mind the vision of endless centuries with no one to share her secret, no one to love—except the cold Jewel Being from Plar.

Nathan touched her hand. "I suppose I'll go back to Venus now and then. But there's somewhere else I must go first."

"Where?"

"To the Pool of Luline. Do you think I'm going to let you live the rest of that thousand years alone?"



THE VIZIGRAPH

Here we are again, holding the center of the stage for the usual outpourings of brickbats and bouquets. And that large red body we are approaching—we are not approaching it! It's approaching us! *Duck*—it's a ripe tomato!

Wiping pulp and seeds from our eyes, we proceed to the business of the meeting.

We get lots of announcements of STF clubs and fanzines. We wish we could print them. But, after a heated policy-session, we've decided not to. Too many of 'em, for one thing, and, for another, too difficult to weed out the merely egotistical from the legitimate and worth-while; somebody would suddenly get sore. Finally, since we are a quarterly, it wouldn't be worth much to the announcers. Three months could go by before the announcement got printed. For instance, and to break the rule, we received notice of the PACIFICON too late for the Fall Issue—and this issue goes to press too late to announce it. Poor Rick Sneary! His letter this ish had to have the club news cut out—more than half the letter. Dretful sorry, Rick!

We apologize for the slip of printing Basil Wells' name on the Fall cover. The story was shifted to this issue—and we just didn't check back to the cover. So what? *We're stupid!*

Pic artist Moore has begged us to let him have the originals he did for the Bradbury tale, *Creatures That Time Forgot* (pp. 96-97 of the Fall Ish). So don't ask for it, chilluns.

Ye gods, Oliver wins again! (Pick one, Chad.) Walton takes second (pick two originals, Bryce; if Chad names one, you get the other; otherwise, name your preference.) And Kennedy takes third (pick three, JoKe).

Youse guys are *not* getting your mail in on time! Look at the sale date—you've got less than a month after that. What d'ye think I am—a

PUBLIC LEANING POST?

NO SPACE PIRATES—NO INTERPLANETARY WARS—NO FUN

Detroit, Mich.

DEAR EDITOR:

Bryce Walton's letter in the *Visigraph* is the motivation behind this letter of comment. Congratulations to you, Ed, for publishing this letter and giving it first place in the Vizi. It's high time someone wrote something along these lines for the Vizi.

Bryce's five points are all too true in regards to present day scientification. I will even go so far as to say that *all* present STF rests on an illogical basis—with the possible exception of a few sociological yarns such as Bob Heinlein wrote. As Bryce said, the basic premise upon which all STF is based, whether consciously or unconsciously, is that, while scientific and technological advances will be made, the status quo of so-

ciety will remain intact. Thus we see the spectacle of interplanetary trading concerns, space pirates, money-mad monopolies, one-man dictatorships, and all the operating characteristics of our present-day political and economic system. The more obvious faults, such as money being trucked around in rockets instead of armored cars, fellows toting ray-blasters instead of Colt automatics, and all the other props of the standard space-opera, may readily be seen for the same reasons that today we don't have knights driving around in tanks, huge steel castles, and laborers watched by secret service agents instead of medieval overseers. But there is a much more valid reason why the whole structure of STF is being undermined. That is the culminating effect of the industrial revolution, just now being felt in its full implication.

Let us take a specific example and track it down to its conclusion. All stories concerned with interplanetary wars, space piracy, pioneering, racketeering, etc., are taking for granted that present economic operations will continue unchanged. But, even today, the advances of science and technology are bringing the day close at hand when the method of buying and selling goods for a price, using money, will have to be abandoned, with a scientific method of distribution taking its place. And what effect would this have on the future? War, with the elimination of buying and selling, would cease to exist. As money would no longer be used, space pirates, interplanetary police and what-have-you would also have to go. Consider the explorations of a new planet. With machines doing most of the work, let us take mining as a specific example. The rough-and-ready drink-hard, die-hard miner would cease to exist. Educational standards of the time would be such that the staff of trained technicians required to man the machines would not be the type to engage in drunken brawls and fist-fights.

As Bryce has pointed out, one-man dictatorships would be impossible. Likewise, one-man "solar system savers" would be non-existent. In the first place, the chance of all-around knowledge being concentrated in one man would be extremely improbable in those days of specialization. Secondly, if a "menace" appeared, it is unlikely that knowledge of its presence would be restricted to one individual. And, thirdly, anything that could seriously menace an advanced civilization of the future could not possibly be mastered by one individual.

I could go on and on, citing many such cases of fallacy in STF, but, after all, STF authors are only human beings and as such are subject to the same misconceptions in the sociological field as are the rest of us. The atom bomb is doing much to change this situation. Therein lies its significance—it has suddenly awakened men to the fact that science and technology have radically changed every mode of life and thought. Today, for example, we are thrilled at the thought that the harnessing of atomic energy could provide "abundance for all" when all the while such an abundance could have been produced by present industrial plant capacity, if people would only have realized it and done something about it.

Bryce's reference to Technocracy interested me. I quote: "Scientific progress in physics, technocracy, has forged so far ahead of social 'science.'" Since when is technocracy "scientific progress in physics"? From the rest of the paragraph, I gather that Bryce is on the right track, but that

statement was poorly constructed and misleading. Technocracy is science as applied to the social order, or, social engineering.

Incidentally, Bryce is guilty of the same type of thing he criticizes, in his story, *Prisoners of the Brain Mistress*. The assumption that as labor-saving machinery is introduced and science makes life more easily-lived, people will degenerate and decay is psychologically unsound. I'll wager that if someone told the Puritans about present science and industrial techniques, they'd say we were certain to decay . . . and, remember, Hitler thought we were "decadent" because of our "easy" way of life. Psychology must of necessity keep pace with physical science.

In closing, I'd like to say that Bryce's awareness of the situation is a promising sign. I wish more people were as alert as he is. Bryce, you ought to get into scientific fiction—I think you'd enjoy our sociological discussions.

Give Walton first place for an original, with second and third going to Sigler and Murrell, respectively. Oh, yes—here's another vote of thanks for Bradbury's excellent "Million Year Picnic," and a brickbat for "Lorelei of the Red Mists."

Sincerely,

HENRY ELSNER, JR.

CALLS US NAMES, HE DOES

Clyde, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR:

Great Ghu (to coin a phrase)—a new editor! Egad. The turnover on STF editors is tremendous! Welcome to the stable, Mr. Payne. Don't get trampled in the rush to the mailbox.

The stories rate as follows:

Dread-Flame of M'Tonah—wonderful. 'Mr. Hasse has again hit the jackpot. More power to him. *The Creatures That Time Forgot*—a darn good off-trail job. *Through the Asteroids—to Hell!*—good. Rumor has it that Mr. Yerxa is dead. True? (Regretfully so.—Ed.) *The Derelict*—unusual, to say the least. *Six Tuesdays*—I couldn't quite follow the reasoning, but good anyway. *Enter the Nebula* and *Total Recall* were good, but not quite good enough. As a whole, this issue was the best for a long time.

Now to the most interesting part, the Vizigraph (which, I believe, is the main reason your mag is still in circulation).

WIN is snatched by the Mad Genius (Oliver, naturally), even if he did place my letter third. PLACE is taken by R. Anger, who is still yelping about THE DIVERSIFAL. Norman Storer, my old pal, breezes in to SHOW. He only mentions me!

Now to the most priceless contribution to the Viz, viz, my letter. You, sir, are a Payne in the neck! You cad!! YOU EDITED MY CUSSWORDS!!! A fiendishly foul trick if there ever was one. And I wasn't among the Big Three! Oh, the futility of it all!

As to artwork I take back all I said about cover artist Martin. I bow and scrape in humble obeisance. The guy's good! Just look at the Fall cover. G'wan. Hold it about two feet away. Look at the thing as a whole, not as a collection of figures. You'll see that it's actually beautiful! I'm not kidding. The colors blend beautifully. Ye Ed will do well to keep Martin, even if you have to threaten to take away his yo-yo.

Martin's inside pics were the best in the mag,

especially the one on page 65 (whistle). Next, page 71 (another whistle). Next, page 5. Second best artist was Anderson, on page 49. I don't know as it illustrated the story, but it was eye-catching. Next was Rubimor-Moore, best on pages 96-97. Next was the rather poor Leidenfrost on page 35. Last was Kiemle on page 85.

Miscellaneous comments: in my opinion, PLANET has climbed right to the top of the STF pile. Congratulations! On bended knees I beg you to publish it more often! . . . Mr. Walton, those five themes you dislike are the bread-and-oleo of many writers. . . . How does Oberfield's ear taste, boys? . . . Mr. Sigler, your insufferable insinuations about *Lorelei* infuriate me. It IS a fantasytale, but great. . . . Mr. Smalldridges' opinion about hinged clothes I agree with. Take a quick look at page 35. A very quick look, mind you. What hinges! . . . Mr. Bradley is wallowing in my ignorance, I've never met Mister Pythagoras and his cubes. Don't want to, either. I know enough square-heads. . . . Mr. Oliver, I'll make you eat that word of praise for *Pumpkin-Eater*. Minus salt and catsup. . . . Needless to say, Jewett's letter was right in the groove. (Who was that lowly person who just yelled, "You mean a rut!") I gnash my teeth in passionate anger.) . . . Glad Mr. Kennedy liked *Lorelei* as it is difficult to get .38 caliber bullets. Maybe the gal had a wig on . . . a Leidenfrost cover would be okay, Storer. I can remember only one on PLANET. . . . L. Carter, as an auctioneer, you are sharp as a piece of wet spaghetti. *Red spaghetti*. . . . I have read Mr. Ley's book, Mister Murrel, and found it to be amazingly readable. It's better than a novel and, besides, I learned something. . . .

I'm going now, but never fear—I'll be back!

Sincerely,

TOM JEWETT.

HERE'S RED MEAT FOR YOU, GANG

DEAR EDITOR:

Three cheers for Phil Warner! The world would be a better place if it had more inhabitants of his type and a great many less of the egotistical, style-happy quarter-wits who usually people the columns of *The Vizigraph*.

Incidentally, did it ever occur to you that some people buy your magazine for the stories and are not particularly interested in wading through eight pages of the intellectual growing pains of your more adolescent readers? Personally, when I plunk down 20 cents for a magazine, I like to get my money's worth of fiction, and unless you can see your way clear to yanking out *The Vizigraph* and substituting an extra story, written by a capable, professional writer—I'm afraid I'm just going to take my business elsewhere.

If you are worried about the money you would lose by this procedure, as no doubt you are, why don't you put out a separate magazine entirely devoted to the spoutings of *Vizigraph* contributors—and make them pay for the space they take up! The average *Vizigrapher* is so much in love with himself that he would probably shell out heavy sugar for the privilege of seeing his name in print.

Think it over.

Yours truly,

HERBERT SNEDECKER.

PIXIE SACHS PICKS ON THE PIX

South Bend, Ind.

DEAR EDITOR:

Hmm tum diddy tum dum (that's me humming away as I enter the newsstand). . . . Now let's see—I wonder if any STF mags are on the shelves today. No, none—but wait! Aha . . . boinnng! There's PLANET! Hidden under the counter for the customers' protection again, I see. Now watch this (are you watching, folks?) I bend down and pick up an uninteresting mag while, at the same time I stealthily slide PLANET under my coat. No, I guess that I don't want this cowboy mag; I'll put it back. I swiftly scurry out of the shop as fast as my spindly legs can carry me. How I shall go home to my cage and read this. Hahahahaha! (the laugh of a distinct maniac).

Now that I have read the stories, I shall turn to the *Vizigraph*, as one inevitably does. AHA! A new ed. and what a name !!! Payne! Does that leave him open for a pun or does it? And those initials! PLP! Now, would that by any remote chance be Public Leaning Post?

So Chesty Whitehair is gone, huh? I knew that he couldn't take the deluge of my unprinted and also unprintable letters. So the old fellow has finally given up? Poor guy. Sob . . . hahahaha! (again, the disreputable laugh of a maniac). Well, now there is another one to work on. Perchance, he may enjoy my letters. I see my old friend Jewett is in the bloody columns of *Vizi*. Humorous as usual. He is rivaled by Joke ennedy and Fad Oliver. No! Fellas, no! Don't, please, don't start another feud. Spare my BB brain.

The pwetty papew id gone! Baaaw! This time I shall not classiff why the stories, the pics will take up the rest of this second page. Pic one—the cover. Phooey! It does not illustrate any of the stories. Does it represent the *Vizigraph* with a poor fen sprawled on the rocks with a horrible fate of another of those BEMBabies confronting him? P.S. has gone too far (you may use that as the title of my letter). First, the gals HAD a little something on. We, poor fen that we are, griped at that and thought that only the health mags could expose the birthday suit farther. BUT NO! The cover is stripped bare!

Page 3: Out of proportion. Page 5: out of balance! Page 7: why the cloaks? Page 35: just horrible; is the guy at the wheel nearsighted or something? Page 49: Can you call that a pic? P.U. Page 65: not up to standards. Page 71: hmm, not bad. Page 75: have an elstinko seegar, it'll help the sitcheation. Page 85: the men of the future had FLAT heads . . . fair drawing. Pages 94, 96, and 103 are good, except for the over-blackness of page 96. Page? Well, what-ayuno—ran outa pics!

The *Vizigraph* is good. Who said something about *pink* BEM's? Whyyyy, I'll moilder da bum! Imagine, wrecking the time-built tradition of a green BEM!

Stfantastically,

HARLEY SACHS.

NO NUDES IS GOOD NUDES

Woodside, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

I see by the Fall P.S. that two earth-shaking events have occurred.

First, newly-initiated editor, there's you. Just by reading your prelude to la Vizi, I can tell we STFfans are going to like you. Because you know our language—by Ghu! And an editor knowing and using fan stuff is something.

Second—drag out the button-hooks men, we're undone! Nude fems on the cover!!! At last a mageditor has taken the fatal step. Please—no nudes is good nudes. Don't ruin what's left of STF's name. Scantily dressed is bad enough. NO cover nudes. Ten to the twenty-seventh times, NO.

Now to the stories. Ray Bradbury takes first again with "Creatures." He's going great guns. The cover symbolism is great (even with nudes). Moore is swell 'cept you can't see the drawing for the shadows. But that's his style.

Anderson's drawing tops the issue. For some reason I love that guy's art. Darn that title in the middle! Get him to do more. He seems to do very little in every issue.

I see Leroy Yerxa graduated to your mag, but, sadly enough, it is just after his death.

Well, I'll shut my big typer now. And, remember, if this sees print, Kuttner's back and PLANET's got him. Monroe Kuttner, that is!

No nudically yours,

MONROE KUTTNER.

ANYBODY WANTA SEE OUR BRUISES?

Helena, Mont.

DEAR EDITOR:

Ow! That cover! You have eliminated the BEM, but I can't see much improvement. It looks like you have carried over the hero from Martin's previous cover-pix—or can't he draw any other type of man? Long haired and space-bronzed, eh? Phooie! And what is Basil Wells' name doing on the cover? As for your statement that, when people stop buying PLANET, it will be time to start monkeying with the cover, please understand I buy it in spite of the cover. At least try a space scene—or are you afraid you'd lose your job?

As for the fiction, I think you are in a rut. Practically every story (and not in this issue alone) seems somewhat drab and drawn-out. It puts all your stuff in a class by itself, almost at the bottom of the STF list. If it's any consolation, though, I've read duller stuff in books. Rest assured, I probably wouldn't buy your mag if I didn't want to keep my collection as near complete as possible. But don't get disgusted—I wouldn't tell you this if I didn't have hopes for eventual improvement—and how can we hope for improvement if we don't at least attempt to give some constructive criticism? Here's wishing you the best!

The stories are all just about equal, so far once there's no need to rate them. Hasse's continuation of the future-history series, *Dread-Flame of M'Tonak* (my tonic?) is somewhat welcome but just doesn't compare with the grand *Alcatraz of the Starways*. Apparently your May '43 ish was one of your bright spots—would that there were more equally good ones! Who did the three pics for this story? Martin? (Yes—Ed.) I'd like to be sure, because I card-index all the fiction, art and letters in each mag of my prozine collection. So please don't omit the credit lines when the artists don't sign their pics. Enter the *Nebula* started, out rather well but soon went to pieces. Andromeda sorta made a fool of your

futuristic Green Hornet—it should have been her story. As for Leidenfrost, he could be one of your best artists, but since he's back he seems to have produced nothing but mediocre work. I think the trouble is his subject matter—too many humans. *The Derelict* is a rather creditable piece of fiction for a fan. But "t'ang" was a rather weak attempt at a name for a habit-forming drink. I much prefer Harry Walton's "dewlog." Outside of some typographical errors and another weak climax, the story wasn't too uninteresting. I don't care for Anderson's conglomerate illustration, though. Here's hoping we have no more of them. The FEATURE FLASH is one of the best you've ever had. Let's have more of these, in a serious vein. *Total Recall* was nice and short—perhaps that was one of its best features. Here's a vote for more short-stories. The pic: Martin again? Somehow it's effect isn't as bad (weak?) as some of the stuff you pan off on us. *Through the Asteroids*—Yerxa. Well, well, well! Those asteroids were kinda thick, weren't they? And as for the cutters on the Z-1000—oh, yeah? Also, he received his discharge from the Warrior Patrol awfully easy, didn't he? And I don't go much on pics with twisty-doodle edges—give us photographs. Heh. *Sir Tuesdays*—I could complain about this, too, but will just say, Why don't editors see to it that their authors fix up the loose ends they leave lying around? The illustration could have been one of the best in the ish with a few more details (machinery?) and a less primitive space-pilot. *The Creatures That Time Forgot*: Bradbury seems to have abandoned the morbid mood for well-cultivated suspense—and that's all to the good. This seems to be one of the best stories Bradbury has done. I like his ideas, but the fuzzy conclusion (perhaps it was cut or contains typographical errors) did a lot to pull the story down. Moore seems to be a pretty good artist—I imagine the double spread would look a lot better on slick paper, or even that newsprint (?) you used last issue. Here's my vote for that slicker paper. How about that? But don't, don't go bi-monthly—at least until you improve your story material and style.

Now for the Vizi, I wonder what it takes to win an original? It would be nice to collect them—only I haven't been able to get any yet. But, the comments . . . How does Bryce Walton know E. E. Smith's force fields won't hold or withstand atomic power explosions? I say they will—and he can't prove me or E. E. Smith wrong. I'd contest some of Bryce's other points, too, if I had more room (maybe I oughta write two letters?) Write me, Bryce? As for Oberfield—tsk, tsk! Next, Sigler: Dear Ed, please do more than blush! Re Tom Jewett—editor, was that intentional—mixing up his address with that of your publishing company? But on to the ratings for winners of originals: 1. Joe Kennedy; 2. Norm Storer; 3. Tom Jewett.

WALTER A. COSLET.

PFFT! NO MORE PLANET

Galveston, Tex.

DEAR EDITOR:

As I clutched the Fall Issue of PS in my mns-ular hands and prepared to feast my optical orbs upon its contents, imagine my amazement when a little man in a purple zoot suit appeared magically from its pages.

"Say, buddy," he commenced, "why not let me save you some trouble, eh?"

Recalling all the dire warnings about black markets and allied horrors that every citizen has been subjected to of late, I frowned terribly and reached for my atom pistol. "Yeah?" I replied, plumbing the depths of my vocabulary. "How?"

The little man smiled and gestured toward the magazine. "I live in there, see?" he informed me. "I'm sensitive to my environments, and maybe I can direct you to the better parts. Like a guide, see?"

"Okay," I said cautiously. "Leave us proceed."

"Well take the slums of my home first," began the little man, "and then work out to the society section. You ever hear of the Nebula? Neither had I, but I find that he's the greatest crackman of the Galaxy. You won't like *Enter the Nebula*, buddy. Carl Jacobi may call him Nebula instead of The Pink Mask, but it's just a detective story. My science-fictional home would be a better place to live without such tales.

"There were a couple of yarns I couldn't live in at all, pal. Larry Sternig's *Total Recall* for one. A "Solar Bureau of Investigation" agent, a scientist, his BEAUTIFUL daughter, and "three days to save the System!" Leroy Yerxa's *Through the Asteroids—To Hell!* was not much better, but I understand that Mr. Yerxa is now deceased, so I won't comment further.

The little man noted the look of gloom on my face. He adjusted his purple zoot suit carefully. "Cheer up, buddy," he commanded. "We're in the residential districts now. Rocklynne's *Six Tuesdays* was a new treatment of an old theme, and a fairly decent place to spend a night in. It was no Waldorf-Astoria, though, pal. We're coming to a rather nice section of my place, at long last. Hasse's *Dread-Flame of M'Tonak* was a good story. You'll like it, especially with the pattern he has built up through several stories.

"Say, buddy, we're in the snazzy end of town now. Fellow by the name of Matthews turned out a honey of a yarn called *The Derelict*. Very well written. It was a pleasure to live there.

"But—brother! We're in the castle now. Way up in the clouds. You know Ray Bradbury? The finest writer in sciencefictional fantasy today! His *Creatures That Time Forgot* is a classic. You'll think so, too, pal."

With that, the little man disappeared. "Wait!" I cried. "What about the artwork—the Vizigraph?"

He popped up again. "Whatsamatter, buddy?" he asked. "You lazy or sumpin'?" And he faded away. I have never seen him again. It is all very sad. But I carry on.

The cover was one of the best that I have seen on PLANET. I knew Martin had it in him. No BEMs, no hysteria. Even a little symbolism. Good color-scheme. Egad, men, what is this world coming to? The interior pix, however, were not as good as they were last trip. Moore had the only good illustrations, in my opinion. In vain, no doubt, I plead on bended knee for Hannes Bok, Frank R. Paul, Virgil Finlay, etc. But I'll settle for a return to the high standards you set for yourself in the last issue. Fair enuf?

In La Vizi, Bryce Walton brings up a good point. A blind man should be able to see the trend. First, the bow and arrow (one man). Then a machine gun (several men). Next, explosives (more men). Then, the first atomic bomb (a city). Next will be the atomic bomb—capable of destroying a continent and, after that, a world. Where, now, are our future wars with Interplanetary Patrols and whatnot? By the

time our young Earthman hero out in his spaceship had decided to argue with the Martian villain, he'd glance down at Earth and . . . pfft! No more planet. Give Mr. Walton first place. I find it difficult to decide between the others. Jewett, Anger, Kennedy, Gabriel, Storer, Carter, Waite—La Vizi is certainly looking up! Give the pix to Storer and Jewett, I guess.

By the way, I have since carefully read this issue, and I agree completely with my little friend in the purple zoot suit. (Shall we call him Buster? We shall.) Isn't that incredible?

To you, Mr. Payne, the best of luck. You've got a swell mag.

Sincerely,

CHAD OLIVER.

AARRGG . . . EEK . . . PANT PANT!

Wichita, Kan.

DEAR EDITOR:

Ah . . . I see that every one is back to La Viz, including (ugh) Joe Kennedy. Hmmm, so the column is beginning to get some life . . . there's a letter by Storer . . . one by Jewett (Tom said after reading his letter in La Viz that I would probably be sick—I was) and wot do you know . . . one by Chad Oliver . . . abhhhhhh, the ecstasy of it.

Now to one of the best portions of the magazine, namely, the cover . . . WOTS THIS? TWO ISSUES IN A ROW WITHOUT A BEM . . . aaarrggggg! I beg, I plead . . . please, please, PLEASE! . . . a BEM . . . we vizifians want a nice horrible BEM. I was surprised to see that PLANET even got to Wichita's newsstands with that cover girl . . . I repeat Doris Currier's question of a few issues back. BUT . . . above all things, keep Martin on the covers. I like the deep colors that are used.

Now the stories . . . boring isn't it, Ed? Every issue they keep giving their gripes on the stories and you have to set back and listen . . . but since I'm no atavist (SNEARY . . . YOU KEEP QUIET) I'll do the same as every one else. *The Creatures that Time Forgot* was the best of the novels. *Dread Flame of M'tonak* was second. The best of the shorts was *Derelict*, next was *Through the Asteroids—to Hell!*; *Six Tuesdays*, *Enter the Nebula*, *Total Recall*. So much for that . . . now back to La Viz. It seems that all you have to do to be come unpopular in this section is to say that you like Edwin Sigler . . . why don't you boys lay off of him tho . . . he's a good thinker, if nothing else . . . Why, he rites me letters eight pages long . . . and, believe me, that's hard to do! To Mr. Bradley: there is one glaring mistake in your hypothesis; you have completely ignored Epimetheus' law of exergueation. While the lateral surface (area) of a cube is philously possible, it does not mean that it will form the sciatic layers needed to butyraceously armature the junta. Altho the syndetic witenagemote (yes, it's in the dictionary) is powerful enuf to displace the Walpurgis factor . . . your comments, Mr. Bradley.

I notice that some of your readers don't agree on the page numbers . . . Kennedy sez that the girl with the long hair was on page 3, while Vizifan Howard Gabriel sez the girl on page two's hair was conveniently long . . . Gabriel was wrong, as you can see—she was on page 865¼ . . . so there!!! Oberfield's got the

wrong slant on things . . . read Vol. 1, No. 1, of the MARTIAN NEWS LETTER and you'll understand all that . . . (or go crazy). Jack Smalldridge . . . nnnnyaaaa! Yer father's proton gun. Oliver . . . eeeek. Tom Jewett . . . give him first place in choice for originals. R. R. Anger . . . So I'm egotistical . . . so what? Kennedy . . . give him some setro-frenalot—NSK 54. Gabriel . . . one horn to the young man. Robert Melville MM1/c . . . give him third place in choice for illo's. Norman Storer . . . seems I've heard that name before . . . oh yes, he's a Jr. Bem . . . EEEEEK—a JR. BEM! . . . give him second place for illo's . . . the only reason I didn't give him first place is because he didn't like Brackett (has he read *Shadow Over Mars*?) Lin Carter . . . nnnnyaaa—get back into *The Ether Vibrates* where you belong. R. G. Waite . . . see, he don't like Sigler! Jack Murrell . . . (?) Oh, yes, I omitted Bryce Walton at the first . . . give him 77777777th place for the illo's.

Inside illo's . . . 3—o.k. . . . 5—o.k. . . . 7—o.k. . . . 35—bad . . . 49—superb . . . 65—o.k. . . . 75—poor . . . 85—good . . . 94—superb . . . 96-97—superb . . . 103—superb . . . 128—pant pant!!!!

PLEASE . . . take the ads out of the inside pages. "P.S.'s FEATURE FLASH" . . . heh . . . deCamp never heard of anything about Lemuria . . . yet.

Well, I leave you with a parting thot . . . why was Basil Well's name on the cover? . . . he didn't write any of the stories. . . .

Telisincerely,

TELIS STREIFF.

LET'S ALL BUMP HEADS TOGETHER

Wheeling, W. Va.

DEAR EDITOR:

If I may, I would like to unseat a knight in armor. The one who plugs Willy Ley—Willy's knight. He does not see eye to eye with me and I don't think it is because he is shorter, so I will accept his challenge.

In the first place, rocket experts can be wrong, so why should authors accept any expert's word as fact when it is theory? W. L. was wrong when, in 1940, he stated that rockets were "not a future deadly instrument of war." Hitler's boys did not know this?—V-21

Suppose you were rocketing to Pluto. To make that run on nothing but the momentum set up by a starting blast would be like trying to coast your car up the side of a high mountain. In the Pluto run, you would have to first escape the gravity of Earth and then have enough power to overcome the gravity of the sun. I don't think I would want to be in a rocket that blasted off with enough force to take it to another planet on its momentum. I would rather build up momentum at a comfortable rate and then maintain enough rocket thrust to neutralize the pull of gravity.

I will grant that power drive would not be needed where there is no gravity or where the gravity would agree with your motion, but even then you would probably need retarding jets.

What's this about combustion chambers wearing out?

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WINNING THE WAR required a mighty effort in a common cause. Americans—many of them—made that effort. The war was won. But we still have common causes.

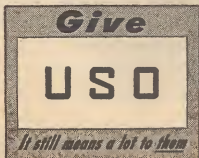
There is, for one, the support of the USO serving our armed forces, greatly reduced from the wartime Army and Navy but still large and still much needed for a job that must be done. Much of our Army and Navy today is new and young. USO and the lift to morale it gives is as valuable to these youngsters as it was to the veterans. The clubs and camp shows and work in Hawaii, the Philippines, and other Western Hemisphere outposts should be continued. Nor must we ever forget how much this organization can mean to our thousands of wounded and sick of the armed forces who are still in hospitals.

The war is over but not the boredom and the loneliness which are a part of war and its aftermath. There the USO can and does help. That is why it deserves a generous contribution from every American, grateful to those who have honorably served and are honorably serving their country in the Army and Navy.

For those at home, Community Chests support local health, welfare and recreation services. For those away from home, in the armed forces, there is the USO.

Give to the USO and your Community Chest.

FAIRFAX DOWNEY



Centuries ago, two knights might have been discussing their chances of taking some particular fort. One asked of the other, "Y'all got any idee how we-all c'n bash 'em?" (it was a dark knight).

"Yes," replied the knight called Day. "I am inventing a siege weapon that employs an internal combustion motor and will fly right over the wall." Then he added thoughtfully, "Since I am a mental giant I might as well invent the jet plane, atom bomb and the rest of that junk they will have in the future."

"Hyuk, hyuk!" laughed the first and threw in a chuckle for good measure. "Man, wit all dis sof' metal we got, you couldn't even git frum heah to theah without replacin' yoah 'bustion motah!"

So saying, I sit staring somewhat soberly and say that space ships should surely spurt steadily someday, since science is sure to synthesize some suitable substance to sustain safely said searing, sizzling spurts issuing from space-ship jets. (If you stutter on "esses" do not try to read the above.)

I have just completed a poll of what the readers want (from the Viz.).

Space wars, space pirates, buckeye monsters must go! Then who is the villain, the Ed wants to know? Why, we're only readers, so don't be a lout! That's for the authors; let them dope it out.

And no evil rulers for heroes to hound, but plenty of action in space and on ground. Make the hero a right guy, like me or you, but don't let him think like you or I do. And we want happy endings, all free from strife, in which the brave hero mustn't give up his life.

No! No dames in the mag, for that is so lewd. Just trim curves in clothing, not quite in the nude. And mind you, the stars must be reached in a day, but don't exceed light-speed. Oh, never! Nay, nay!

C'mon, Ed, stop bumping your head 'gainst that wall! That's a new plaster job and you might make it fall!

Your Friend and Fan,

BILL OBERFIELD.

WILLIAMS VERSUS WALTON

Verdun, Quebec.

DEAR EDITOR:

It was sure swell to see my name in second place in La Viz, last issue. This will be the first original pic I've ever won. But enough gloating, on to the fray.

As usual, I'll attack my fellow Vizifans first. Bryce Walton lays himself wide open for a barrage of wrathful howls by his last missile. Naturally, I can't help adding my own helpful, cheery comments to the others. Here goes.

1. There always will be wars, interplanetary or otherwise, unless nations or planets agree consistently on every subject. Human nature just couldn't stand it!

2. I certainly don't agree with your second thought, either. There are, and always will be, human leeches who suck the life blood from honest men. People who care for only one person, the domineering "I." Such people could easily become your future Space Pirates.

3. I note you also believe people will radically change the way they "talk, love, feel, and generally behave." I doubt that! I noted you made

no suggestion as to how people would change, for instance, in the field of love. I personally see little room for improvement there! Love, though, often brings jealousy, jealousy creates hate, hate turns men to monsters again. It's a vicious circle but try to get out of it.

4. Perhaps the idea of "One-Man Dictatorships" are unfeasible, unimaginable, and definitely screwy. But try to tell that to the man who tries it!

I also enjoyed R. A. Bradley's letter, especially the part halfway through where he states, "Now let's consider another angle of the problem." I thought that was a darned good idea. I certainly didn't understand the first one! (By the way, what was the problem?)

Martin also seems to have, like other artists, veered from the straight and narrow of following stories in the illustrations. Also, I find his men are too chunky, and the upper half of his women seems deformed.

And, like Joe Kennedy, I demand the return of the Ringer Family. I thought all their cartoons were super-swell. How about the rest of the fans?

And so, now that I'm sure that there is not one friendly fan left me, having incurred their wrath by my vitriolic insults, I'll turn my eyes to the stories.

1. *The Creatures That Time Forgot*. Definitely a different story. More of the same, please!

2. *Dread Flame of M'Tonak*. Not too good. Sounded like anyone could do the same thing as Ketrik did. I like my men to do the impossible.

3. *Through the Asteroids—to Hell!* was a story with an unusual and unexpected ending. Yerxa was always a master at the unusual. How about a P.S. Feature Flash on this swell author who passed away so recently?

The rest were all grade B material. It's two-thirty and blazing hot and, since only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the mid-day sun, I think I'll put down my pen now and crawl back between the cool whites.

Planet-ically yours,

GERRY WILLIAMS.

A NODE TO JACK MURRELL . . .

South Gate, Cal.

DEAR EDITOR:

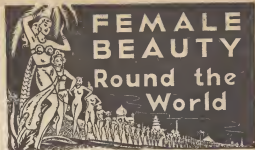
I just returned from a two month vacation and haven't had time to read any of the latest stories, except for Bradbury's. Which was a little odd, but very good.

Your artwork wasn't to good. Send Martin back to Mars. That is of course only my idea.

The Vizigraph was pretty good. Hard to pick. But, 1. Joe Kennedy, there is no fan like a friendly fan I always say. #2, Bryce Walton, very true, I agree. #3 Robert Bradley, I love science. And a node to Jack Murrell for a good try at enlightening the — fans. And I might add that I don't count Smallbridge as a Rival, he miss-spells in a different way than I do. As any fool can see.

Yours Fenly,

RICK SNEARY,
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